



Stop the clerics creeping coup

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On 5 May the second round of Iran's rigged election took place. The result was a victory for the reform wing of the Islamic regime: but its triumph could be short-lived.

Since the 'reformist' wing of the Islamic ruling elite won a majority in the first round, there has been a creeping coup by the state forces loyal to the conservative faction. Key reformist journalists have been jailed, 17 newspapers closed, 1,500 media workers sacked and the reactionary paramilitary forces have terrorised many campaigners from the reform wing.

One coup plotter was recorded saying: 'One option is to sit and watch, the other is create a strong executive headquarters. In the first phase, we weaken the other side. In the second, we stop them from advancing and in the third phase we remove them from the scene.' By that reckoning, phase three will begin as soon as the dust settles on the 5 May elections.

The attack on the press was launched after reform candidates, allied to President Mohamad Khatami, won an overwhelming victory in February's poll. Khatami himself was elected in May 1997 and has since posed as a beleaguered reform politician, hampered by the conservative majority in parliament.

The right-wing clerics have fought back, annulling many of the results where the reformists won - especially in Tehran, which has seen a wave of attacks on and the murder of opposition politicians, and a new set of anti-working class laws. Rather than rely on the now dissolved parliament they are relying on their base within the state machine. The power centre is the Guardian Council (which can veto candidates and cancel election results), and the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij (reactionary paramilitaries).

Twenty thousand workers from the official (pro-reform) trade unions took to the streets of Tehran on May Day in protest at a new labour law passed by the outgoing Islamic parliament. Earlier, thousands of students marched in protest at the shutdown of the pro-reform newspapers and the arrest of journalists.

But the whole of the left and all genuine workers' parties remain banned in Iran - victims of the Islamic Republic that consolidated power in the three years after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Until now the crisis has been a split within the Islamic regime itself. But with the opening of dual power between the two factions, the opportunity is ripe for an independent working class answer.

Khatami himself is running scared of the conservative faction. It has real reactionary mass forces to mobilise: as well as the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, it has always rested on the poor middle classes of the traditional economy and on unemployed youth mobilised by the mosques. The figurehead of the reactionary forces is Shia Islam leader Ayatollah Khameni. But ex-president Rafsanjani has also come to the fore of the reactionary coup. He was seen by some as a mediator between the two factions, but since his election defeat has thrown his lot in with the conservatives.

When thousands of students demonstrated against police raids on the pro-reform universities last summer, several were shot dead in the street. Khameni then urged calm and the reform movement retreated to wait for the election.

With key election results annulled, the press was the next target and April saw a concerted attack on the pro-Khatami newspapers. Khatami again urged calm - and the Basij promptly stepped up the arrests, beatings and stabbings of pro-

reform campaigners.

A parallel process now operates in the factories. One of the last acts of the conservative majority in parliament (Majlis) was to strip labour law protection from 2.8 million workers in small enterprises.

In larger enterprises the Islamic reign of terror has been unleashed during the election period. A factory worker in Alborz told the paper *Kar va Kargar* (16 January 2000): 'I was attacked because when I held a responsibility in the shora (workers' council), I defended the labour legislation and I wouldn't back down. For this reason the factory's security section, the factory's Islamic Basij (a paramilitary militia) and the management told me off and put so much pressure on me that eventually I lost my immunity so that I couldn't be elected to the Islamic shora. This time they tried to beat me up to get me out of the scene all together.'

Khatami's own social base is loosely organised in a movement that brings together a section of the Iranian bourgeoisie keen to defrost relations with the USA in order to open up Iran for super-profitable investment, together with young intellectuals and especially women who are sick of the social repression meted out by the Islamic regime.

The starting point for a revolutionary strategy in this situation is to recognise the Khatami movement for what it is: a reactionary bourgeois opposition to an archaic regime. Khatami still wants an Islamic Republic, and defends the use of repression and torture against all democratic politicians as well as the independent workers' movement.

However, the split in the ruling class ? and Khatami's chronic failure to curb the brutal repression ? poses socialists with the task of an independent intervention to split workers and progressive youth from Khatami.

There can be no question of voting for Khatami ? or of taking part in the reform movement's institutions: these are hostile to any socialist argument. But workers can and must defend an unfettered press, fight against the additional restrictions on voting that the conservatives have introduced and support all reforms aimed at improving conditions for women.

The key in all this is mobilising the working class on its own programme. During the 1990s there were more than 500 major strikes. These were organised by clandestine committees of young workers. Together with sections of the students and women fighting oppression, such committees could form the basis of a real anti-capitalist opposition.

The position of the working class is dire. There is 25 per cent unemployment and 24 per cent inflation. More than half the population lives below the poverty line.

Over the past decade workers have shown their willingness to fight for economic reforms ? using protestations of loyalty to the Islamic regime as a cover.

Now the working class has begun tentatively to ally its economic demands ? in particular over the labour laws ? to the Khatami wing's political fight.

This presents both an opportunity and a grave danger: the opportunity is to transform the economic struggle into a political one for power. The danger is to tie the workers to Khatami's movement, in which even their basic economic demands will be forced onto the back burner by the capitalists who lead it. Khatami ? like Rafsanjani before him ? sees the state-owned oil industry and the backward bazaar economy as so many obstacles to a neo-liberal bean-feast, with themselves at the head of the table. So they are no allies of workers.

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of left-wing forces to mislead the working class into propping up Khatami. The Tudeh Party ? the official Stalinist party which collaborated with Ayatollah Khomeini in the first stage of murdering the anti-imperialist revolution of 1979 ? has come forward to demand that workers actively vote for Khatami. It warns that the pro-Khatami list is not radical enough and that the movement will not win simply by voting ? but refrains from spelling out what is necessary.

Instead, it has hitched itself to the Khatami movement ? even though its economic programme is pro-imperialist.

However, there are already reports of disillusionment among the masses with Khatami. Agence France Presse reported that in the industrial suburb of Karaj, there was a low turnout and much scepticism about the reform candidates, even among a crowd of young women who had turned out to campaign.

The most likely outcome now ? if the Khatami movement scores another poll victory ? will see the conservative faction implement stage three of its coup plan. Wider round-ups of pro-reform intellectuals and clerics could be followed by the arrest of key leaders around Khatami himself.

Only mass action can stop that, and Khatami refuses to call for it, fearful of bringing an independent working class dynamic to the struggles for democracy, freedom of the press, rights for women and an end to Islamic repression.

Mass strikes, tied to the formation of revolutionary workers? councils (shoras), are the only alternative to the bloody rule of the torturers, rapists and murderers of the conservative clergy.

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