

Iran: Government neoliberalism, repression fuel mass discontent

Protests shake regime

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June 20, 2009 — Since the June 12 Iranian presidential election, and the almost immediate announcement of a landslide victory for incumbent Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, Iran has been convulsed by mass protests alleging electoral fraud.

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Despite savage repression, including mass arrests, beatings of protesters, attacks on universities and at least 22 deaths, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets daily. The protests started in Tehran on June 13, but have spread throughout the country. The protesters have been calling for a re-run of the election, claiming that Mir-Hossein Mousavi won the elections despite the official results giving Ahmedinejad 64%.

The protests are occurring despite both Ahmedinejad and Mousavi emerging from within the same undemocratic regime and holding similar positions on many issues. Mousavi is presented in the Western media as a “reformer”, however he was prime minister during the 1980s when the regime committed some of its worst atrocities.

Nonetheless, the breadth of the protests, and the willingness to risk death, indicates widespread anger. — potentially more anti-regime than pro-Mousavi. In Iran, public executions and flogging are common. A regime that violently represses trade unions, curbs the rights of women, gays and lesbians, national minorities and other oppressed sectors inevitably builds up grievances over time — anger that can explode onto the streets. The post-election protests reflect this.

Ahmedinejad has traditionally had support from sectors of the poor, and has relied on populist anti-imperialist rhetoric. That this is still able to mobilise sections of the oppressed has been shown by the counter-protest rally of Ahmedinejad supporters on June 14 that the British Guardian said the next day involved tens of thousands. The June 18 Guardian said a June 15 rally supporting new elections “estimated by Tehran’s mayor, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, to be as many as three million-strong”.

Mobilisations on this scale have not occurred in Iran since the 1979 revolution, in which a mass uprising toppled the US-back Shah dictatorship. On June 16, a number of demonstrators were shot dead by the Basiji, religious police, and other pro-government militias. The government has admitted to seven protester deaths, as well as 15 students killed when the Basaji attacked dormitories at the University of Tehran on the night of June 14.

On June 19, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei demanded that the protests stop. Khamenei is the unelected “supreme leader” who actually wields executive power. However, some in the religious and political hierarchy have supported Mousavi’s call for new elections. Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri accused the government of vote-rigging.

Western media accounts

While the protests are no doubt an expression of anger at a repressive regime, the Western media's view of the democrat Mousavi against the dictator Ahmedinejad is flawed.

It is also hypocritical. You get the sense that the only places in the world where electoral fraud and repression exists are in countries governed by forces the West doesn't like. This ignores the deeply flawed 2000 presidential election that placed George Bush in office, followed by his administration destroying civil liberties at home and abroad.

In Saudi Arabia, governed by a brutal US-backed fundamentalist regime, free elections are unheard of.

In his June 4, 2009, Cairo speech, Barack Obama became the first sitting US president to admit that the US government helped organised a coup that overthrew the elected government of prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953.

Mosaddeq's crime was to nationalise Iran's oil industry. The US-backed absolute monarchy of the Shah, which replaced Mosaddeq's government, was as extreme in its repression as it was loyal to its US sponsors.

The current regime emerged out of the 1979 anti-Shah revolution.

Not only did the current repression not start with Ahmedinejad, who was elected in 2005, Mousavi was prime minister from 1981-89 when it was at its height. No matter who you vote for in Iran, the regime wins. All candidates must support the theocratic principals of the Islamic Republic and all candidates are vetted by the religious hierarchy. Four hundred candidates nominated for the recent presidential election. Only four were approved to run.

Such institutionalised rigging raises questions as to why the regime would resort to post-election manipulation of the result. It is not possible yet to know for sure whether the elections were rigged or to what extent. The low votes recorded in areas known to be strongholds of opposition support has been given as evidence of at least some fraud.

While the protests are taking the form of support for Mousavi and new elections, the large numbers involved and their steadfastness reflect a deeper hostility to the regime. High inflation and unemployment are helping fuel anger.

`Twitter revolution'?

There is speculation that what is occurring is a version of the CIA-manipulated "colour revolutions" such as the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia and the 2004 "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine.

This uprising has been dubbed the "Twitter revolution" in the Western media due to the role of the online social networking site in spreading information among the regime's opponents. This is accompanied by a focus on the participation in the protests by middle- and upper-class Western-oriented youth.

However, use of Twitter is unlikely to have mobilised millions of Iranians. Middlesex University academic Ali Alizadeh said in a June 18 Cinestatic.com article: "The creative self-organisation of the movement is using a manifold of methods ... many of them simple and traditional, depending on their availability: shouting 'death to dictator' from rooftops, calling landlines, at the end of one rally chanting the time and place of the next one, and by jeopardising oneself by physically standing on streets and distributing news to every passing car."

The presentation of the movement as largely Western oriented and middle class is related to the nature of the hostility between the Iranian regime and the imperialist First World. The West is angered by Ahmedinejad's support for resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon, as well as his government's alliance with Latin American governments that seeks to weaken elements of Western domination.

Ahmedinejad has played on Western hostility to boost his domestic support. This has included his casting doubt on the extent of the Nazi Holocaust (anti-Semitic comments which are less than helpful to the Palestinian cause). Holocaust-denial aside, Mousavi's positions on these questions are not fundamentally different. And these are not the cause of popular anger among Iranians — who largely support the Palestinian struggle and are hostile to imperialism.

1979 revolution

Obama was right in his Cairo speech when he acknowledge the Iranian people's hostility to the US stems from the 1953 coup.

The US ruling class hatred of Iran stems from the 1979 revolution that overthrew its client. This revolution damaged US interests, and lost it control over one of the world's largest oil reserves. US corporate interests are desperate to reverse this. Although the 1979 revolution ended up with the current regime in power, it began as a genuinely popular mass movement. It was marked by a strike of 30,000 oil workers and massive, courageous demonstrations by working people, defying violence.

The ability of the conservative clergy to emerge from this upsurge in control is largely a product of mistakes by, and disunity among, Iran's left-wing groups. Most of the left did not take seriously the threat posed the religious fundamentalist clergy, which sought to ensure the revolution did not challenge capitalism but replaced the Shah with a new elite.

Some even believed that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini could be manipulated. The largest socialist group, the pro-Moscow Tudeh Party, even collaborated with the clergy in crushing rival leftists. It was later crushed itself by the theocratic regime it helped install.

However, the regime's legitimacy depended on the revolution's anti-imperialist gains.

The US response to its puppet the Shah being overthrown and replaced by a new regime hostile to its interests was to encourage the neighbouring Iraqi dictatorship of Saddam Hussein to invade Iran. The resulting eight-year war bled Iran, but failed to overthrow the regime.

Neoliberal regime

Thousands of leftists were rounded up in Iran during the war under the excuse of national security. When Mousavi was PM, thousands of such political prisoners were massacred. While anti-imperialist in rhetoric and aspects of foreign policy, the regime's economic policies have, since the 1990s, been neoliberal.

Despite repression, trade union struggles have continued, such as the epic struggle of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company (SWTVBC). The leader of the bus drivers, Mansoor Osanloo, has been imprisoned since 2004.

Iran's presidential election became a lightning rod for discontent across society. The regime's response has exacerbated the problem. Mousavi appears to fear that the demonstrations have the potential to threaten not just Ahmedinejad, but the whole regime, of which he is part. He has several times urged his supporters not attend illegal demonstrations, but changed his stance when it

became obvious the protests would occur with or without him.

Seeking to maintain leadership of the movement, he is trying to ensure protests remain limited to the campaign against the electoral fraud. He has so far succeeded.

However, a June 18 statement by the SWTSVBC said: "The demands of almost an absolute majority of the Iranians go far beyond the demands of a particular group. In the past, we have emphasised that [as long as] freedom of choice and right to organise are not recognised, talk of any social or particular rights would be more of a mockery than a reality."

The statement called for an international day of trade union solidarity with Iran for June 26, which has been endorsed by a number of international trade unions.

In a June 17 ABC Radio National interview from Tehran, British journalist Robert Fisk said he saw police and soldiers fraternising with protesters — even protecting them from assaults by the Basiji. Similar events occurred in the early stages of the 1979 revolution — a parallel it could not have failed to notice.

It remains to be seen whether the protests continue to deepen as an expression of deep-seated anger at the regime, or remain contained within the confines of a dispute between two figures in the ruling elite.]

P.S.

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