

Iran: Which side are you on?

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Why are some U.S. leftists siding with the repressive Iranian regime against pro-democracy protesters?

At the beginning of August, the government of Iran launched a trial against more than 100 of its most prominent opponents, claiming that they had conspired with foreign governments to overthrow the Iranian regime by organizing a campaign to discredit the legitimacy of the country's presidential election in June. Among those accused were former vice president Mohammad Ali Abtahi, former deputy interior minister Mohammad Atrianfar, former deputy economic minister Mohsen Safai-Farahani, former deputy speaker of the Parliament Behzad Nabavi, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, as well as various Iranians living outside the country. That the conservative theocratic Iranian government, which has faced widespread street protests since the disputed election, should respond to its critics in this way was perhaps not surprising. Sadly, however, over the past few months, similar accusations have been leveled against the protesters by sections of the U.S. left.

In fact a fierce debate has been raging on the left about the character of the protests in Iran and whether or not anti-imperialists in this country should support them. Neo-Stalinist groups like the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) and the organization from which it split a few years ago, the Workers World Party (WWP), have predictably denounced the protesters as stooges of Western governments, and accused them of being secretly funded by U.S. government organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy.

Both PSL and the WWP operate on the principle that my enemy's enemy is my friend, and have a history of supporting the repression of popular movements that challenge regimes that are opposed by the U.S. government. In 1956, the WWP supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary to crush a mass workers' rebellion calling for greater freedom, and which had begun to establish factory councils. Similarly, the WWP backed the suppression of Solidarity, the mass independent trade union in Poland in the early 1980s, and the Chinese government's brutal crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. In the case of Iran, the argument is that simply challenging the regime—no matter how repressive it may be—plays into the hands of the U.S. and other Western imperialist powers, who would dearly like to reverse the results of the country's Islamic revolution in 1979.

Similar arguments have been made by a variety of other influential figures on the left including the Marxist sociologist James Petras, radical media critics Edward Herman (who has co-authored several books with Noam Chomsky) and David Peterson, and Yoshie Furuhashi, editor of MRZine, the daily Web magazine of the socialist journal *Monthly Review*. In fact MRZine has turned itself into a forum for critics of the Iranian protests and for apologetics for Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, leading one member of the *Monthly Review* editorial board to resign.

Much of the controversy has focused on the election itself, in which official results gave Ahmadinejad an unexpected landslide victory over the main opposition candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. With an official turnout of 85 percent, Ahmadinejad was awarded 63 percent of the votes versus Mousavi's 34 percent. The results were so hard to believe that they resulted in the biggest

street protests in Iran since the 1979 Revolution. But Petras, Herman and Peterson, Furuhashi, and others all argue that there is no serious evidence that the results were rigged. According to Herman and Peterson, for example, in an article published in late July, allegations of “massive vote fraud and a possible Mousavi majority are not based on any credible evidence whatsoever.”

Herman and Peterson point to a preelection poll that gave Ahmadinejad 34 percent of the vote and Mousavi 14 percent. But it is worth noting that the poll was conducted by telephone from outside the country by the Washington organization Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion. As the Iranian historian Ervand Abrahamian points out, “the name and location of the polling organization” may well have influenced the results.

In any case, the poll was taken in May, several weeks before the election. Abrahamian notes, “Once the actual electoral campaign—by law restricted to just ten days—got started, the race became much tighter.” Abrahamian points to three factors that may have shifted public opinion:

- First, a series of TV debates in which Ahmadinejad was generally thought to do poorly. Herman and Peterson dispute this, claiming that Ahmadinejad won the debates, but their only source for this is Time magazine journalist Joe Klein, who does not speak Farsi;
- Second, Mousavi’s reputation as a populist who reduced income inequality when he was prime minister during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s;
- Third, the role of the women’s movement, spurred into activity by the prominent role of Mousavi’s wife, an outspoken defender of women’s rights, in the campaign.

The result was huge demonstrations around the country in favor of Mousavi. With the race apparently tightening, many observers expected that Ahmadinejad would not win over 50 percent of the vote and there would need to be a runoff. Newsweek cited an internal Iranian government poll that indicated that Mousavi would win twice as many votes as Ahmadinejad. According to Abrahamian, “To preempt this, the Interior Ministry, which was running the election and was headed by a millionaire friend of Ahmadinejad, acted decisively, giving Ahmadinejad not just a majority but such a resounding one that dwarfed the votes gained by his opponents.”

Abrahamian cites considerable circumstantial evidence that the elections were fixed:

“The [Interior] minister purged unreliable civil servants from the electoral commission. He restricted the number of permits issued to poll observers; prevented some of them from entering the 45,000 polling stations; set up more than 14,000 mobile electoral trucks (making the vote easy to fiddle); printed far more ballot papers than there were eligible voters; cut off communications to Mousavi and [another reformist candidate, Mehdi] Karroubi’s headquarters on the day of the elections (Mousavi’s office in Qom were torched in a mysterious attack); and, as a clincher, at the end of the election day, broke precedent by not having the ballots tabulated on the spot but instead rushed to the ministry where they were “counted” by his aides.”

There is additional evidence. Farideh Farhi, an expert on Iranian elections at the University of Hawaii, with detailed knowledge of district-by-district voting trends concluded that the result was “pulled out of a hat.” According to an analysis by the British non-governmental organization Chatham House (mentioned but rejected as speculative by Herman and Peterson), in order for Ahmadinejad to have won the 24.5 million votes awarded to him in the official tally, in a third of the country’s provinces he would have needed to receive the support “not only all former conservative voters, all former centrist voters and all new voters but also up to 44 percent of former reformist voters—despite a decade of conflict between these two groups.” And Sadeq Saba, an Iranian affairs

analyst for the BBC, found that instead of being reported by province, the “results came in blocks of millions of votes,” with each candidate receiving almost exactly the same percentage in each block, with no significant regional differences in the vote, a result that went against “all precedent in Iranian politics.”

But whatever the results of the election, critics like Herman and Peterson are convinced that the ongoing protests that followed at the very least play into the hands of Western imperialism and may have been orchestrated from the outside. They describe the protests as “yet another campaign that fits well with one of [the U.S.] government’s longest-running programs of destabilization and regime change.” And they argue that calling for solidarity with the demonstrators “encourage[s] leftists to pull down their natural defenses against U.S. imperialism.”

Going beyond this, they claim “the protests are certainly not entirely ‘homegrown’ and have a pretty clear link both to direct destabilization campaigns and to the massive destabilizations imposed upon this region of the world by the United States and its allies.” Herman and Peterson even claim that opposition groups may have deliberately goaded the Iranian government into cracking down as part of a master plan: “it wouldn’t be surprising if the Iranian financiers of the Mousavi campaign had concluded that they could achieve their political objectives best, not at the ballot box in June 2009, and not by arguing their case before the rigid bodies of Iran’s executive branch, but by tailoring their messages of dissent to foreign audiences, taking to the streets to provoke repressive responses by state authorities.”

These allegations are deeply insulting to the millions of people who have participated in the demonstrations, and in particular to the dozens who have been killed by the authorities and the thousands who have been arrested and sometimes brutally tortured. There is certainly a long history of failed U.S. attempts to destabilize the current Iranian regime, but there is no evidence that the continuing protests are in any way the result of outside manipulation. Indeed, both the leadership at the top and the movement on the streets have been unequivocal in their opposition to such interference, and in particular to the long history of U.S. intervention in the region. In the end, Herman and Peterson’s case comes down to nothing more than a rhetorical demand for supporters of the protesters to demonstrate that no Iranians are on the CIA payroll.

It is also nonsense to maintain that leftists cannot both unequivocally oppose U.S. imperialism and support the struggle for greater democracy, political freedom, women’s rights, independent unions, and other significant reforms in countries that are on Washington’s official enemies list. To maintain otherwise is by extension to believe that it would be better for movement activists in Iran simply to go home and tail behind the Ahmadinejad government because it is on the official U.S. enemies list.

Those who believe that the protests in Iran are strengthening U.S. imperialism are also missing the real dynamic of what is going on. The world economic crisis has created a huge split in the Iranian ruling class over both domestic and foreign policy, which has created an opening for a movement from below to emerge. While politicians like Mousavi and former president Ali Rafsanjani are attempting to use the protest movement for their own purposes, they have been pushed to take more radical positions as a result of the street demonstrations, deepening the split and making it impossible for the movement to be completely repressed. In late July the death of two young protesters in state custody and reports of the torture of political prisoners created such public outrage that Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was forced to close the detention center involved and denounce the treatment of the prisoners held there.

And while the demonstrators’ demands began as relatively modest, the dynamic of the protest movement has created the possibility of a much greater radicalization. As Abrahamian, for example, rightly notes, “By denouncing children of the [Islamic] revolution as foreign-paid ‘counter-

revolutionaries,' Kahmenei, Ahmadinejad and their allies have alienated a considerable proportion of the population—maybe even the majority—and could end up transforming reformists into revolutionaries." To point this out is not to entertain fantasies of the imminent revolutionary overthrow of the current regime, but simply to be aware that the current crisis has created the possibility of rebuilding a genuinely left-wing revolutionary current in Iran for the first time since the left was wiped out by the Ayatollah Khomeini in the early 1980s. The future course of events in Iran is impossible to predict, but the potential emergence of a new left opposed to both U.S. imperialism and the current Iranian regime, is something that all genuine supporters of socialism and liberation can only embrace.

P.S.

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<http://www.isreview.org/issues/67/critthink-iran.shtml>

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