

Leftist student activity in contemporary Iranian history and socialist resistance

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This is the extended version of a talk presented by Behzad Bagheri, an Iranian socialist activist, in a meeting jointly organised by Socialist Alternative and Iran Solidarity-Melbourne in July 2013.

Contents

- [Before 1979](#)
- ['Cultural Revolution'](#)
- [Reformists in power](#)
- [Left wing student papers](#)

Student movements have been at the forefront of the political struggle for freedom during Iran's contemporary history. Except for some brief episodes when revolutionary outbursts and uprisings shifted struggles to the streets, universities have always been the main place where dissident political currents can make their voices heard.

Universities have been an important centre for organising and expressing political views in more explicit ways mainly because, traditionally, they have been more open than the repressive atmosphere outside. Students also have a higher level of political consciousness and can therefore become seeds of revolutionary movements. So it is no surprise that, before the 1979 revolution as well as after it, universities have been one of the main strongholds of left wing movements and political parties.

There were four waves of the leftist student activity in modern Iranian history: two before the 1979 revolution and two afterwards. I will give a short account of the first three phases and then elaborate more on the last experience, which I was a part of.

Before 1979

The first wave began in the late 1940s and continued up until the 1953 military coup d'état and for a short while after. It was a fairly democratic period, and there was an open political atmosphere in which the left could organise. The student movement at that time was mainly sympathetic and even organised by the Tudeh Party, which was a socialist party with a national-reformist agenda and close ties with the USSR. At that time, Tudeh was the major player and the pillar of the Iranian left.

Socialist activists in the universities actively supported the nationalisation of the oil industry by

Mohammad Mosaddeq's nationalist government. Some of them also tried to go to rural areas and impoverished urban neighbourhoods in order to educate peasants, the working class and the urban poor and spread socialist ideas among them. During and after the 1953 coup, students organised a resolute resistance against the military government, which reached its peak when police opened fire and murdered three leftist students on the Tehran University campus during a demonstration against Nixon's visit in 1953. In the following months, the police and army intelligence clamped down on the student movement and broke it.

The second wave began in 1966, when two groups of leftist students merged and formed a united group with the purpose of organising an armed resistance against the Pahlavi dictatorship. Those days were the heydays of anti-colonial guerrilla movements and, in particular, the victories of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions encouraged the left wing students to choose armed confrontation with the regime. Left wing students at the time reasoned that the brutality of the dictatorship, the lack of any organised opposition and the need to stimulate and arouse the masses left no other way but to take up arms. This mind-set was summed up with reference to Regis Debray's philosophy that a "small engine" must jump start the "large engine".

In the initial phase of their activities, the students mainly used the universities as a base from which to spread propaganda and recruit members. In 1971, they started an armed rebellion by attacking a police station in northern Iran, followed by a period of organising underground cells for waging urban guerrilla war; operations included blowing up the British and US embassies. They reasoned that terrorism served as propaganda to encourage people into action. They also inspired the formation of other armed groups, Marxist or Islamic, who, along with the Fedaii movement, played an important role during the 1979 revolution and afterwards, especially in the universities.

By the middle of the 1970s, all the leaders and most of the members of these student-based guerrilla groups were either in jail or executed by military courts. Thus, at the beginning of the revolution, although they were popular among people, particularly among the urban poor and the middle class, they were disorganised and unprepared for the enormous challenges facing them.

'Cultural Revolution'

The leftist student movement was one of the most active elements in the 1979 revolution, taking part in demonstrations and invigorating the popular movement. For the first time in Iran's contemporary history, the student movement had spread nationwide, with offshoots in almost all universities. But it was not a united force since it was connected with different old or newly formed political parties and groupings. Therefore, during this period, we should speak about leftist student currents working alongside each other in and outside the universities.

During this period leftist student activists managed to establish fairly close links with radical sections of the labour movement and the women's movement, which included groups such as the Association for the Liberty of Women, the Union of Combatant Women and the National Union of Women. This solidarity was a point that the next generation of student activists tried to keep in mind.

When the newborn Islamic regime started to consolidate its power through repression and limitation of the liberties won through blood and struggle during the revolution, it saw the universities as a major bulwark of the revolutionary movement, so it took harsh and bloody measures (called "Cultural Revolution") to purge dissident activists, mainly leftists and liberal Islamists, and to suppress leftist students; this culminated in the closure of the universities and the murder and imprisonment of hundreds of students.

After this initial assault, the Islamic regime tried to stifle civil society and movements, in particular the labour movement, and also crack down on the opposition, mainly the left. Between 1982 and 1988, more than 100,000 leftists and socialists, many of them students, were arrested, tortured and executed. The Islamic regime reopened the universities in 1984, replacing the former radical and active student organisations with their own loyal, state-sponsored organisations such as the Islamic Associations and the Basij, which were tasked with forging and strengthening unity between the university and the seminary, acting as the repressive branches of the government and watchdogs of the authorities.

The Islamic Associations acted as the official student union on campuses. The national body to which these associations were affiliated was called Daftare Tahkim (Office for Consolidating Unity between the University and the Seminary). The generational shift that occurred in the 1990s had a big impact on Daftare Tahkim. The students who had grown up before this period and were entering the universities for the first time in the early '90s had no experience of the Cultural Revolution, and had less fear and fewer ties with the official ideologies.

This new generation of Islamic Association members and their representatives in Daftare Tahkim began voicing criticisms of conditions, namely the repressive situation, the dictatorship and Rafsanjani's government. They demanded freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association and a more open atmosphere in the universities. In the following period, Daftare Tahkim and its affiliated associations would become the major base of the reform movement and spread reformist propaganda among the population. Some of their members, such as Fatemeh Haghighatjoo and Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoeiniha, later became members of parliament and were forced into exile after the 2009 uprising and subsequent crackdown.

Reformists in power

When the reformists took legislative and executive power in 1997, they had to mobilise this student base to counter the rising opposition of conservative students and the Basij on university campuses and to demonstrate that they had roots in society and that their demands were the demands of the people. This period caused a split in the allegiances of the official university student organs. The Basij became a bastion of the conservatives and the Islamic Associations became a reformist stronghold.

As time went on, the Islamic Association students became disillusioned and frustrated with the reality of the reformists in power and the interference of the unelected organs of the state. For example, when parliament proposed to debate a bill on freedom of the press, the Supreme Leader issued a decree ordering parliament not to debate it. The response of Khatami, the reformist president, was that he could not challenge the word of the supreme leader. In addition, the conservatives began a counterattack using one of their most effective tools, the judiciary, which is controlled by the supreme leader and completely conservative. The judiciary began shutting down reformist newspapers, including one of the main organs of reformist propaganda and one of the more radical, Salaam.

Convinced that the reformist government was unwilling to stop this attack on freedom of the press, Tehran University students were mobilised when the campus Islamic Association and Daftare Tahkim called on students to protest against the press restrictions. These protests in 1999 became the most widespread and radical against the Islamic regime since the early years of the revolution. The street protests were violently repressed by the police, Basij, plain-clothes forces such as Ansare Hezbollah and the Intelligence Ministry; students were once again attacked directly on university

campuses and in their dormitories, rounded up, jailed or killed.

These developments radicalised Daftare Tahkim, which declared that it wanted to “overtake Khatami” [i.e. position itself as more radical]. Its leaders, such as Ali Afshari, were arrested, tortured and made to confess and repent on state TV. This radicalisation of one of the main official student bodies coincided with widespread dissatisfaction with reformists in society and created a general radical atmosphere on university campuses. Every year there were protests of thousands of students demanding the resignation of the supreme leader and calling for a referendum. [A referendum is generally seen as a call for a different political system. It is therefore an implicit attack on the Islamic Republic.] This radical atmosphere made the re-emergence of a radical left wing movement possible.

The reform movement came to the forefront of politics when Mohammad Khatami was elected as president in 1997 on a platform of expanding political and social freedoms, freedom of expression, strengthening of civil society, easing the tensions with the West, re-establishing relations with the US and encouraging economic development on the basis of a free market, the capitalist agenda and encouraging foreign investment. Despite holding all the elected centres of power, namely government and parliament, the reformists failed to live up to their promises and could not make any substantial change in the Islamic regime’s power structures or its relationship with the people and foreign countries.

When students and civil society activists began to challenge these power structures from below by mobilising on the campuses and the streets, the reformists not only refused to organise this force, but also refused to involve these people in the reform process altogether and then collaborated with conservatives in their suppression. At the same time, the space outside the universities was not as open as inside, and worker organisations were not yet developed enough to assert more substantial pressure from below by organising nationwide strikes. The conservatives benefitted the most from this ineptitude and reluctance. They not only blocked every effort at change but regrouped and united their ranks and took control of the military forces and economic resources in order to remove the reformist nuisance and suppress the increasing popular protest that was engulfing every corner of society.

In the final years of the Khatami’s so-called reformist government, the country was in a mess. High unemployment and soaring inflation were crushing the working class and urban poor. Any kind of protest was quelled by the police; in one case, police shot four workers dead in a strike in a copper mine. Although it was more open politically than any other period under the Islamic republic, it could not meet the people’s slightest demands or expectations. Therefore, frustration and anger were the first outcomes of the people’s disillusionment with the reformists, which drove the whole society to become more radical and critical of the entire regime. This growing discontent created a situation for the left to develop, especially in the universities.

Left wing student papers

I entered Tehran University in 2004 to study archaeology. At this time there were some left wing papers being produced in Tehran University. *Khak*, a revolutionary Marxist paper whose founders were influenced by Workers Communist Party literature, especially the founder and main theorist, Mansour Hekmat’s work, was the main one. They considered themselves influenced by Hekmat’s theories but were not affiliated with the WCP group. *Khak* was financed by the resources of its members and funds gathered from supporters.

Daaneshgah va Mardom, one of the other papers, was founded before *Khak* in 2002 by Parisa

Nasrabadi. Daaneshgah va Mardom was closer to the traditional Iranian left and had a more centrist line. It wrote mainly about anti-globalisation, anti-imperialism and Third Worldist politics.

The group that produced *Khak*, which I eventually got involved with, was established by Behrouz Karimizadeh and Kaveh Abbasian. both leftist students of Tehran University. Behrouz studied economics and Kaveh was a film student. They were in their early 20s when they established Khak to spread left wing views on campus and to create a group around the ideas in the paper. The paper served as a way of identifying and getting in contact with potentially left wing people.

The new left wing students had learnt from the mistakes of the past underground and armed groups and had concluded that the best way forward for the left in Iran was to operate openly on university campuses. We reasoned that under the existing conditions, a clandestine organisation would sooner or later be discovered by the authorities, and that because clandestine organisations are smaller and their members unknown to the public, they can easily be isolated and destroyed. Therefore, we refused to organise underground cells for armed resistance and terrorism. We also reasoned that the existing relatively open environment on the campuses and the natural contact that could be made between students on a daily basis provided the best means for creating a left wing movement.

Behzad Bagheri, 19-Sep-2013

P.S.

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* The text is edited by Afshin Nikoueresht.

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He was twice arrested, in 2008 and 2010, by intelligence authorities and charged with building illegal student and labour organisations, organising illegal rallies and protests, and for producing propaganda against the Islamic state. He was forced to flee Iran in 2010 and lived in exile in Turkey as an asylum seeker for more than two years. He has been living in Australia as a refugee since January 2013.