

# **Sedition, Revolt, Revolution & Social Disintegration**

## **On the recent nationwide protests in Iran**

Torab Saleth

### **Background**

The recent uprisings against the Iranian regime were, on the face of it, protests by the urban poor and the unemployed in more than 80 cities against endemic poverty and against the corrupt clerical regime responsible for it. In the internet age, when extensive social networks are available, such events cannot be suppressed or kept hidden. What started in Meshed soon spread everywhere, and hundreds of videos of these protests were distributed and watched on social networks as they were happening. The spin given to these events by various political interests has, however, created total confusion about the real nature of these protests and their significance for future survival of the "Islamic" regime.

Iran's "supreme leader" Ali Khamenehi called the movement a "sedition" organised by the USA (mentioned together with the names of the other usual suspects: Israeli, Saudi or Mujahedin), while the US President Donald Trump congratulated the Iranian people for "finally" following his advice and rising up against their corrupt government. The "National Liberation Army of Iran", one of the many fronts of the Mujahedin's "opposition for hire", exaggerated the extent of the uprising to precisely 132 cities (they are everywhere and they know everything!). So then they could claim credit for it on behalf of the ghost of their long deceased/disappeared leader, Masoud Rajavi, who can of course even inspire from the grave. One of the two dozen groups claiming the Fedayii name (The People's Devotees) saw from London the signs of an "armed insurrection", while the BBC Persian Service was warning against the "detrimental impact" they would have on President Hassan Rouhani's government. Rouhani himself announced that the hardliners started it, while the hardliners blamed the whole "mess" on the incompetence of Rouhani's government. The monarchists were over the moon, claiming that slogans in support of Cyrus the Great were proof of a new dawn of the monarchy in Iran. One interesting fact was the conspicuous absence of any declaration of opinion, either of support or condemnation, from the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or his supporters, whom many political pundits considered to be in fact the main culprit. The various circles of "legal" (or tolerated) semi-liberal or opportunist/reformist opposition, while keeping their distance from the protests, nevertheless used them to push for more reforms. Our syndicalists bemoaned the absence of trade unions, while revolutionaries pointed out the absence of a revolutionary party. In the meantime, in social networks, radicals were promising a thousand "Paris Communes" to come.

Even if we concede an element of truth in all the above proclamations, any serious observer of the political situation in Iran knows full well that it is much more complicated, and cannot fit into any of these simplistic and one-sided explanations. To understand the

politics of the past four decades, including the recent events, we have to keep in mind a number of basic facts about the Iranian situation.

## Revolutionary Situation

Although the 1979 revolution was defeated by the bourgeois-clerical counter revolution, objective revolutionary conditions are still present in Iran. None of the historical democratic tasks of the Iranian revolution have been resolved. Iran is a country of unfinished revolutions. The demand for "freedom, security and legality", from as long ago as the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, is still as relevant today as it was more than a century ago. The "national problem", created by the imposition of a bourgeois state from above by the British imperialists in 1921, is more intense today than it was then. The suppression of national minorities is still a major pillar of central rule in Iran. In terms of the demand for the separation of the mosque from the state, or on the question of women's equality, we have even gone centuries backwards since the establishment of the Islamic regime.

Furthermore, the anti-capitalist tasks of the Iranian revolution, which came to the forefront of the masses' demands in the last four months of the 1979 revolution, have now become even more dominant after four decades of an even more exploitative "Islamic" capitalism. Let us remember that one of the main causes of the 1979 revolution was the stagflation crisis of 1975, which followed the end of a period of US-managed and US-directed capitalist economic boom in Iran after the Shah's "White Revolution" of the early 1960s. We now have a similar, but many times more intense, stagflation. Capitalism in its epoch of decline has shown two major tendencies which, with its latest globalisation, have become more acute and widespread: first, the rate of capital accumulation increases faster than the rate of new productive investments, and, second, the rate of dispossession of independent producers than the rate of their absorption into the new labour force. Thus during the Shah's reign, 15 years of a capitalist boom resulted in an astronomical concentration of wealth at the top ("the 1000 families") and an explosion in the number of people living in shanty towns (to more than 5 millions). Four decades of "Sharia" capitalism (in effect, the merchants' heaven-on-a-neo-liberal-earth) has only sharpened the same contradiction. The enormous growth of corruption at the top, linked to plundering of state revenues – just consider one item of 1 trillion dollars from oil and gas during Ahmadinejad's presidency – by groups linked to various centres of power, plus the accompanying growth of capital accumulation by dispossession of others, has created a more explosive situation than in 1975. At the opposite end from a super-rich layer of new capitalists, the numbers of urban poor has now almost tripled to more than 13 million. They face a government totally engulfed from top to bottom with scandalous levels of corruption. Every sub-clique of the ruling clique is now accusing the others of corruption and nepotism, and exposing them for it. The term *aghazadegy* (being the sons of clerics) has now entered Persian slang as synonym to nepotism.

This situation can turn any social gathering into a political event, and any political event has explosive possibilities. An insignificant issue can quickly cause a political eruption, and every eruption can bring to the surface all the unfinished tasks of the Iranian revolution, and thus draw many different social layers into open struggle against the regime. Thus a football match can quickly give rise to skirmishes with the security forces. Even the simplest tactical differences inside the governing clique itself can lead to a political crisis on a massive scale. We have observed this phenomenon many times during

the rule of the Islamic regime, from huge revolts in individual cities or localities, to even national movements of protest erupting out of nowhere. The last significant example was the protest movement against the rigged presidential elections in 2009. The recent events were only the latest example of this phenomenon. Two different local protests, in Meshed (about the collapse of pension funds) and Kermanshah (about the collapse of mortgage funds), rapidly morphed into a mass movement of protest against the corruption at the top across the whole country.

Add to this two new features of the Iranian conditions to better appreciate these explosive qualities: the important role played by young people, and the widespread use of social network. Even the horrendous middle age despotism of the mullahs, with their base of millions of constantly mobilised armed thugs, cannot control this explosive tendency.

This is not some hidden feature only accessible to scientific analysis. Differing interest groups inside the capitalist regime itself, or regime-change plotters within the world imperialism, are also well aware of this feature, and try to either avoid it at all costs or manipulate it for their own benefits. On the whole, internal factions of the regime just look at recent examples in Ukraine and Syria, and how popular uprisings from below have been used for violent but "coloured revolutions" from above.

It is, therefore, not surprising that any political crisis, any riots or protests in Iran – no matter what the source, and no matter by whom and for what purpose they were initiated – can rapidly bring to the fore all the tasks of the unfinished Iranian revolution. Even the political machinations of the various domestic or international capitalist factions, can quickly turn into popular uprising and protests.

This allows many observers to make two common mistakes leading to two very opposite and one-sided analyses of any political events: those who define the later fire by who initiated the spark, and those who only see the later fire and not the arsonists. Thus the analysis of the current events have alternated between the two extremes of considering it either as a mere conspiracy by internal (Ahmadinejad, Raisi) or external (USA, Israel, Saudi Arabia) actors, or a pure and genuine popular uprising.

## **Contradictions of the "Islamic Republic"**

By 1982, the Shiite hierarchy had saved the bourgeois state and had consolidated its own hold on political power. The Iranian revolution was by then more or less totally crushed. With the threat of revolution out of the way, the main contradiction driving all major political upheavals in Iran shifted to the contradiction between the bourgeois nature of the state and the clerical form of the new political regime – a contradiction encapsulated in the contradiction in Iran's post-monarchic name and constitution. We have witnessed many times how a faction from within the Shiite hierarchy itself rises up, championing reforms, but as soon as the logic of these reforms brings up the need for the removal of Shiite hierarchy from positions of power, the mullahs react fiercely and push back all talks of reforms. Thus we have had the curious situation that every call for reform has ended up in even more consolidation of the clerics' power. Naturally, this contradiction takes its sharpest forms during presidential elections. Every election becomes a choice between the reformers and the conservatives. Even if in reality the candidates who have passed the filters of the Guardian Council offer no such a choice, people end up making one the champion of reforms. We have witnessed in every election how huge numbers turn out, even by voters who oppose the regime in its entirety, to defeat the mullahs'

candidate and elect the reformer. Even if a monkey with a worse hair style than Donald Trump is presented as the anti-Khamenehi candidate, people will flock to vote it as president.

In the absence of any other political show in town, even the left opposition to the regime is constantly drawn into this charade. Foreign foes seeking regime change in Iran have also fallen into exactly the same trap. Various cliques inside the ruling circles of the Iranian regime have now learned how to use the imperialists' own (fake and state-owned) media, such as Voice of America or the BBC, for their own benefit. The BBC Persian service (labelled by people in Iran as "Ayatollah BBC"), for example, has become the main mouthpiece for the latest "reformer", President Rouhani. The usual "carrot and stick policy" of US imperialism, which in terms of Iran always relies more on stick than carrot, has also gradually shifted – especially during the Obama presidency – towards seeking regime change from within the reformist wings of the regime itself. Let us remember that signing a nuclear deal with Iran has also meant the legitimisation of the Islamic Republic by the West.

The new red-neck US President has however given the conservatives in Iran a new god-sent opportunity to take back more power than they have lost in the last few years. By giving a free hand to Saudi Arabia and Israel to finance and initiate even more chaotic proxy wars in the Middle East, US imperialism is in fact tightening the grip of the mullahs in Iran. The main winner of the "new" US policy will be the Islamic caliphate in Tehran.

In the long term, the capitalistic logic of the state is of course more powerful than the political form of its government. The latter has to conform to its base. In exactly the same way that, on a global scale, every nation-state has had to gradually adapt itself to the logic of global capital. We can see the simplest manifestation of this logic in the gradual departure of clerics from the executive branch of the Iranian government. But this merely allows the state to cover itself with a superficial gloss of bourgeois technocracy, while the real problem of who has the last say remains unresolved. Khamenehi is still the supreme leader, and, thanks to Mr Trump, will remain so for the foreseeable future! He is backed by a 6 million strong militia army and the judiciary, and the security branches of the state are also under its complete control. It is completely shielded from the arrows of people's power by various Islamic bodies, such as the Guardian Council, which controls and limits the rights of the legislative branch.

When Trump cannot challenge the rule of mullahs, what can one expect from the Iranian bourgeoisie? It has shown over the last four decades its utter inability to throw away the shackles of the mullahs. This has in fact created a society in a state of constant schizophrenic mania. We have not only a "normal" bourgeois regime – a more or less a neo-liberal one like everywhere else under similar circumstances – but also, intertwined, an Islamic caliphate which is in control of more, and ever greater, economic and socio-political resources than the former. It is a society alienated from itself. It is like a body which has allowed a foreign agent to gradually take it over. Despite what anybody tells you, Iran is becoming a country more and more covered by a clerical parasite. This is not the type of parasite which will naturally dry out under the sunshine of capitalist growth. The Shiite hierarchy will not give back this "god-sent" power because of World Bank edicts or out of some sense of class solidarity. They have it now and will not give it back without a fight to the bitter end. We even have a centuries-old proverb for this trait of the mullahs in Persian, which basically says "don't expect back anything you lend to a mullah"! Even a military junta may eventually get out of the way of a normal bourgeois government, but not the Iranian Shiite clerics. They have been trying to grab power since

the breakup of the Safavid Empire in the 18th century, and now they have the ability to create havoc all around themselves so that they can keep mobilised the caliphate base which keeps them in power.

This is not a mere ideological hunger for power. Multibillion dollar regional projects run by Iranian finance capital associated with the caliphate and its Pasdaran ("Guardian") Army is also involved. This is at the root of the current crisis. This section of the ruling class is made up of the strongest group of the "new" and "independent" Iranian capitalists. The Saudi-Iranian conflict reflects not simply a sectarian Shiite-Sunnie divide, but also an intense competition between the two sub-imperialists in the region. Each has its own control of relatively large amounts of finance capital. Despite the fact that, in terms of size, the Iranian group is no match for the Saudis and their allies, the political situation in the Middle East and the criminal policies of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia itself – in creating civil wars and total social disintegration – have given the Islamic caliphate in Tehran both the opportunity and the justification to forge all the tools necessary, not only to maintain its domination inside Iran, but also to extend it to the entire region. Relative to their smaller hands they wield a longer stick. In fact one could say the only successful area for the Iranian regime has been the extension of its regional influence. Imperialist policies in the Middle East have only allowed the reactionary forces to grow. The caliphate side of the Iranian schizophrenia has now become more powerful abroad while less popular at home.

The internal factional competitions between reformers and diehards, alongside all the political machinations in the Middle East and the urge of redneck-type US imperialism for regime change in Iran, can therefore become the triggers for regional conflicts and even regional uprisings. These can rapidly get out of control of those who started them. At least the Iranian caliphate is in a better position to benefit from this chaos than the instigators. In fact the Iranian regime has used the dangers posed by imperialist policies in the Middle East to justify its rule internally.

## **Main Factors in the Current Situation**

To the two background features explored above, we must add some more recent ~~and~~ factors to better understand the nature of the mass protests.

The first is the nuclear deal struck between Iran and the G5+1 (i.e. the US, UK, China, France, Russia and Germany), the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and its impact on the factional fight inside the Iranian regime. This deal has in fact achieved what the Iranian bourgeoisie has been incapable of doing for four decades. The mullahs have not merely signed a nuclear deal, but have also accepted the "normal" international rules and regulations of global capitalism. This means that the contradiction between the theocratic regime and the capitalistic state is now resolved, at least at the international level and at least on paper in a legal contract, in favour of normalisation. The deal has really created a new situation, in which the Iranian regime, in exchange for being legitimised as a government, agreed to abide by the rules set by imperialism – and must therefore take real measures to reform many of its institutions, especially its financial system.

The mullahs know this too, and, although without Khamenehi's backing this deal could not have been struck, the hardliners have not yet accepted this reality. They have been trying to do anything and everything in their power to prevent a gradual loss of privileges,

especially as the JCPOA is going to mean more regulations, more scrutiny, and – "god forbid!" – taxes. But given that it was the thoroughly miserable state of the economy that forced the regime into signing this deal in the first place, it obviously cannot very well back out of it again and expect things to get any better. In effect to continue the deal is now the only option open to Iranian capitalism, if it is to grow in the longer term. But the "supreme leader", who is the leader of both the bourgeois state and the religious caliphate, has to defend the deal while at the same time keeping the theocratic engine running and keeping the semi-fascistic religious militias on a permanent mobilisation footing. And this means interventions in the region and developing military capabilities – the ballistic missiles and all the rest of what the West hates in the Iranian regime.

Thus, on the one hand, the deal has given the Iranian regime legitimacy, by global capitalism openly encouraging it to return to the fold, while on the other hand the caliphate side of the Iranian regime is benefitting from screwball US policies in the Middle East, which enable it to extend its area of rule and influence. Inside Iran the sabotage by the caliphate has been going on throughout Rouhani's presidency. Especially after the last (2017) election and the spectacular defeat of Ebrahim Raisi, the candidate backed by hardliners, who was and still is being promoted as a possible successor to Khamenehi, the machinations of the hardline faction against the government have intensified.

It is worth noting that the spark for the wave of protests was first lit in Meshed. This is the seat of Astan Ghods-e Razavi (AGR), an Islamic institution in charge of all the wealth, property and income associated with the shrine of Imam Reza. It is one of the bulwarks of the hardline faction, and headed by the defeated presidential candidate Raisi. The initial core of the demonstrators were pensioners who had lost their pensions and savings in private pension funds which had declared bankruptcy. Mullahs around Raisi had encouraged them to demonstrate and had financed the first batch of rent-a-crowd demonstrators. They have openly argued for many months that it is Rouhani's policies, forced on him by the JCPOA, that is the cause of collapse of these financial institutions. Given the nature of the wheeling and dealing that goes on around AGR with its huge unaccounted funds, many unregulated private funds did indeed develop in Meshed, especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

The Meshed demonstration soon led to both anti-Rouhani and anti-Khamenehi slogans being voiced openly. It therefore seems that even if, as Khamenehi says, it was really a US, Israeli and Saudi Arabian conspiracy, then he and his friends themselves had created the background for such a conspiracy to work. Obviously the latter had taken the former for a ride. We must bear in mind the same people who imposed the Mullahs on the Iranian revolution (i.e. the above conspirators) would surely have their informants inside the regime.

The second problem dominating the political scene is the nomination of the next "supreme leader". This is proving to be a major weakness of this regime. It is now becoming obvious that it must be done and settled before the current leader passes away. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (president 1989-97) could impose the present leader by quoting the dead authority of Ayatollah Khomeini, but Khamenehi, as the recent demonstrations proved, has lost all charisma or dignity while still alive. No one is going to get away with quoting him after his death! Candidates such as Raisi and Ali Larijani (speaker of the parliament) have already been discredited and even exposed by opponents. One conspiracy theory hovering within the political circles in Iran is that Khamenehi

himself is discrediting his possible successors, because he really wants his son Mojtaba in place. He is in fact already running the office of the "supreme leader".

Rouhani's 180-degree turnaround after the 2017 presidential election, by becoming the spokesman of the Judiciary and the military wings, can also be related to the same problem of succession. As the election proved, he has a lot more credentials. He is the only one among the possible successors who has the "legal" backing of the people. He is recognised by the West as the person who signed the JCPOA and is in favour of normalisation of relations with the West. If, in addition, he can convince the Pasdaran Army and the judiciary that he is the only viable option, then he has already won the race. The recent "revelations" by Ahmadinejad, against the judiciary and the Larijani brothers in particular, should also be considered in the same light. The fight for the judiciary and the Pasdaran leadership has now become the main battleground for succession.

The outcome is not predictable yet, but it is certain that the next regime will still have to confront the contradiction between the Islamic caliphate and the bourgeois government before everything else. In past decades, we have seen that the mullahs have only two options to preserve their legitimacy: either a weak form of Islamic liberalism as a choice of less theocracy instead of more, or a weak left-of centre populism as a choice of more charity instead of more poverty. But both have already proven unsustainable in the real situation of Iran, with all its postponed historical tasks. Both alternatives inevitably end up against the dead weight of the clergy. Liberalism will undoubtedly question the legitimacy of the caliphate autocracy, and populism will eventually expose the extreme corruption of those at the top. Many revealing secret documents have already been made public by different factions.

It's interesting to note that it is this semi-legal opposition inside Iran that is the main mover of the political situation, rather than any external opposition or imperialist power. The imperialist media, alongside many "left" groups, have now become commentators on this internal faction fight.

The third factor which has thrown the internal situation into turmoil has been the election of Donald Trump, and its effect on the US administration's policies in the Middle East. The election was itself a reaction to the growing gulf between the US's hegemonic role in global capitalism and its own declining economy. US policy in the Middle East has been one of the most important tools in maintaining and reinforcing this hegemony. Its domination in the world order is based on three major axes: controlling most of the world's finance capital, having a monopolistic position within the world's energy resources and its militaristically hegemonic power. Preserving all three depends on the situation in the Middle East. As has been said before, the Middle East has become the underbelly of US imperialism. Israel's government is its military garrison in the region, and Saudi Arabia has guaranteed its hegemonic control over energy resources and the US dollar's position as the main currency for international exchange. The Trump administration wants both to maintain this hegemonic position and at the same time subcontract its maintenance to the two local players.

The failure of the project for the disintegration of Iraq and Syria during Obama administration has been one of the greatest defeats suffered by the US in the Middle East. Trump's administration has now given a free hand to all its henchmen to bring havoc upon the Iranian regime which is held responsible for this defeat. There are of course always those in the controlled mass media, or even so-called political groups, that try to deny all these and explain everything by "popular opposition" to the Islamic regime. But

the fact of the matter is that two of the biggest Iranian oppositionist groups, i.e. the monarchists and the Mujahedin, and even some of the so-called left groups, are heavily backed and financed by various US foundations, Israel and its lobbies, and the Saudi government. These groups of course have to do something to justify these funds – even if it is a few fake protests and videos.

Nothing is more odious than hearing the so-called Iranian opposition parroting slogans written for them by the imperialists and then filming it to prove that they are the real voice of the Iranian people. The vilest outcome of the contradiction in which we find ourselves is that it has now become legitimate to tout US imperialism as the saviour of the Iranian people. Trump cannot even hide his racism while “defending” the people of Iran. He congratulates the people of Iran for “finally” rising up against the oppressive regime. But he forgets that it was the same American imperialism that handed over the Shah's army and secret service to the mullahs to defeat the revolution of 1979. Iranians have been fighting monarchical and clerical oppression for more than a century, since the time that the parents of Trump's current supporters were defending slavery.

It should therefore come as no surprise that, just a few weeks before the deadline for the US senate's decision on the nuclear deal, frenzied activity has been initiated by all the "rented" Iranian groups and coordinated with the fake Western media in “supporting the uprising of the Iranian people”. They have been putting slogans in the Iranian people's mouth in support of US policies in the Middle East. The techniques of using internet trolls and the quick spread of fake news through social media – which the US now accuses Russians of having employed in US presidential election – were in fact invented and perfected by the USA itself and have been used many times before for example in Ukraine's Orange Revolution or during the Arab Spring. You can always send a small band of paid activists from one of your support groups to any street corner to raise certain slogans and then save the clip to show on global media networks. Better still if you can send these bands inside real protests.

For the US and its allies the total social disintegration of Iraq, Syria and Iran is a better option than a strong Islamic regime in Tehran. This allows them much better control of the entire region and justifies their permanent military presence. Over the last 70 years, many regimes have come and gone, but what has not changed is an ever-increasing number of US military bases in the region. American political experts have even invented a new term for the area contained by these bases: the "Greater" Middle East. This plan has already been well tested and perfected by USA and Israel and is now fully financed by Saudi Arabia and its allies. It would be naive to think that there are not "free" and "independent" Iranian political groups thinking along the same lines, or being persuaded to do so by financial incentives. There are now groups within the Iranian opposition, which openly call on the US to bomb Iran and get rid of the Islamic regime by any means possible. The murderous nature of the mullahs' regime has made such other murderous plans pale into insignificance.

It must therefore be emphasised, given such conditions, that a social revolution or even a small progressive change is not the only possible outcome of popular uprisings. In the absence of any real political leadership, a chaotic outcome leading to some counter-revolutionary seizure of power from above is also as likely. We have already seen how imperialist intervention can lead to the total social disintegration of a country, permanent civil war and the increasing power of armed black bands like ISIS.

## The Economic Situation

Iranian capitalism is facing a severe economic crisis with a depth and breadth far greater than the 1976 crisis which led to the revolution of 1979. In a way, 2018 is looking very much like 1976. You can already see the signs of an upcoming upheaval. The growing levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality that have plagued the global economy, following the neoliberal policies of the 1980s, are many more times accelerated in Iran. According to the most conservative estimates, the population of the urban poor in Iran has now surpassed 13 million – almost three times more than in 1976. Compare this figure to the more than 6 million armed military groups paid and maintained by the caliphate. These are millions of people deprived of even the basic necessities, while Iran now has well over a million clerics. If you look at the videos from the recent pro- government demonstrations, a good proportion of them are wearing the clergy's headgear. The minimum wage is four times below the poverty line, and in some sectors even these minima are not paid to many workers for months. Protesting workers are lashed in public and many worker activists are jailed and tortured. We may have seen the horrendous pictures of Reza Shahabi, the illegally arrested bus driver who was chained to the hospital bed whilst receiving medical treatment. Already seven private pension funds have gone bankrupt with nearly 1 million depositors losing their savings. There are many more bankruptcies to follow.

Most of the unregulated funds and investment banks which have grown, especially under Ahmadinejad's presidency and his neoliberal policies, are now facing bankruptcy and threatening the savings of another estimated 2.5 million depositors. Indeed the entire banking system of the country is on the verge of collapse. It is estimated that at least 45% of the private banks' assets are "poisonous" loans, another 15% are immovable assets (e.g. houses, factories, equipment, etc) and the rest are made up of credits granted to the *aghazadehs* and figures associated with the regime – and therefore with very low returns. An economic spokesperson for the government has warned that to rescue the financial institutions, it will have to dish out more than half of its annual budget in the next few months. Whilst all this is going on there are still active funds falsely promising investors rates of return above 30%.

The official figures for the rate of inflation are still in double digits and youth unemployment has reached 40%. There is probably no country in the world which has in relative terms as many unemployed graduates as Iran. According to the Central Bank, there has already been a 70% reduction in annual development expenditures during the last quarter. During the last month alone, the Iranian currency has been devalued by 13%. Top that with an ecological disaster that is facing Iran, and you get a picture of how deep the crisis is. Soon more than 70% of the farmers will not have access to enough water. This is also directly tied up to the huge desert-like dust storms which have become a permanent feature of many regions. Thus our 21st century mullahs – who are in every way worthy followers of the Safavid Ghezelbash, who could build minarets with human skulls – do not, however, have even the minimal competence of the Safavids when it concerns irrigation systems. The mullahs' rule has now managed in four decades almost to destroy an irrigation system built during the Safavid empire that worked for three centuries.

Rouhani's government has so far shown no plans for resolving, or any sign of ability to resolve, this dire crisis of the Iranian economy. All they can offer is the promise of more investments from abroad. Currently, inward investment does not even match half the flight of capital from Iran. At the same time Rouhani has not even managed to extract

even 1% in taxes from the sector of the economy under the caliphate's control. According to Rouhani himself, in addition to all the properties the mullahs own and run, they take 60% of his annual budget too. This crisis is deepening by the day, as hopes of "foreign investment" have receded further with USA threats of sanctions. The Iranian regime is every day consoling itself that Europe will resist unilateral US sanctions, but, as every banker would know, it will cost the EU more if it were cut off from US banking system. So any hope of a huge and sustained economic growth over the next few years is at the moment hanging in the balance.

## **The Nature of the Protests**

The economic crisis has hit many different social layers, and the recent protests showed this phenomenon very well. Although in many cities specific local problems also created unique combinations, the overall picture shows that the bulk of the protesters were from various layers of the urban poor: shanty town dwellers, unemployed workers, old age pensioners and unemployed young people. The absence of the urban middle classes was noticeable. In this regard, it was very different from the Green movement in 2009. There have been many explanations about this phenomenon; I believe it was mostly a sense of suspicion as to the nature of the demonstrations which dampened the enthusiasm of the middle class. One of the main reasons for their doubt was that, right after the 2017 presidential elections, the defeated hardline faction had started many similar but controlled demonstrations against Rouhani. Furthermore, of course, the economic crisis has not yet hit the bigger towns and cities and the middle classes as badly as the rest of the country. We have to remember that, even during the crisis leading to the 1979 revolution, at first, the urban middle classes were absent. They only appeared on the scene when the question of leadership was more or less settled, i.e. when there was a Khomeini to follow! Currently their best bet is still with Rouhani.

Secondly, although there was a strong working-class presence in all the demonstrations, in the shape of the unemployed and the urban poor, and even of many individual workers, these were not workers' protests with workers' demands. A few of the independent workers' organisations published statements of support – but these were not calls to action, but rather declarations of solidarity after the event. One reason for this was of course the fact that most of the demonstrations took place in smaller towns and cities where there is not a large concentration of workers anyway.

These types of eruptions are a common feature of backward capitalist countries. Radical protests and movements against capitalist governments can very often start from the peripheral towns where the social weight of the urban poor is relatively higher. Such uprisings are a good example of what is sometimes referred to as "blind revolutions", when social layers hovering between the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat, who are the most economically squeezed especially during an economic crisis, embark on active protests. These layers have no independent social outlook of their own, and will either have to follow the workers and socialist leadership if such an alternative exists – or would fall prey to all sorts of counter revolutionary demagoguery by various factions of the ruling classes. This we have already witnessed in the previous Iranian revolution (of 1979). In fact, the defeat of the 1979 revolution was marked by the inability of the working class and its leadership to win over the urban poor. During the first few years after the February 1979 insurrection, the shock troops of the Islamic counter-revolution were filled with recruits from these layers.

But even here there was a significant difference between the recent protests and those of 1975-76. They were certainly not as "blind" as many would imagine. The clear slogans against Khamenehi himself and against all the institutions of the Islamic republic showed that the poorest sections of the Iranian society have not only abandoned the caliphate and its militias, but have lost illusions in Islam itself. There was a noticeable absence of any religious slogans, or any slogans indicating illusions in one faction or the other of the Islamic regime. The most repeated demands, and the most common amongst all the different protests, were those for the overthrow of the entire regime! This is a positive precursor of the future revolution, which will herald the liberation of our society from the plague of religious institutions.

These features reflected important changes in Iranian society under Islamic rule. The position of the urban poor and the lower layers of the petty bourgeoisie in general are much closer to the workers than in the previous revolution. If the working class could achieve its historical task, and take up the leadership in the fight against the clerical-capitalist regime, it can confidently count on the active – and from all evidence highly radical – support of millions of the oppressed and toiling masses.

## **Imperialist interventions**

It is claimed by a number of writers that to emphasise the role of US and its allies in the recent protests is to ignore the genuine nature of this uprising, and to fall into a trap set by the Iranian regime. But in fact the reverse argument is even more true. Those that underestimate the destructive role played by imperialist interventions in Iran not only provide cover for its future interventions, but also discredit the masses by blaming them for the reactionary demands of imperialism raised by its agents in these demonstrations. Despite the self-delusion of US imperialism about how much it is loved by the Iranian people, any sign of imperialist involvement is a kiss of death for any movement against the Islamic regime. Only the paid mercenaries of imperialism are blinded to its reactionary policies in the region. In fact the Islamic caliphate stands on the pillars made up of popular hatred of US imperialism and Zionism in the Middle East. Let us open this issue up a little further.

First of all, the Iranian regime is in reality one of the worst dictatorships ever seen anywhere in modern history – as if the wildest beasts have been brought out of the darkest caves of history, and given the power to rule over the life of Iranian people. If it wasn't for the constant resistance and struggles of the Iranian people, there is no doubt that we would have had as savage and inhuman a regime as we saw in areas controlled by ISIS. Not many observers have commented on the fact that many institutions of the Iranian caliphate are in fact exact copies of what the Saudi Wahabi sect (the ideological leaders and the financial backers of Al-Qaida, Taleban, ISIS, etc) has been building for many decades. It is therefore completely understandable that, in their hatred of this foul regime, some people would fall for reactionary and even pro-imperialist slogans. If anything, one should admire the political astuteness of the Iranian masses, in that they have not gone over completely to the imperialist camp.

The crimes of the shah pushed the people into hand of the clerical counter revolution in 1979. The danger now is that, after four decades of the mullahs' crimes, the Iranian masses could become cannon fodder for the next imperialist counter-revolution. The danger of turning Iran into another Libya or Syria have never been as great as now. As

much as back in 1979, it was our duty to fight the reactionary religious leadership. And our greatest error, and in some cases the treachery of the left, was to tail-end this reaction. Today, too, we have to warn the masses about the dangers of the next counter revolution cooked up by imperialism and its allies. Reactionaries always reinforce each other. This Iranian regime justifies its crimes by pointing to imperialist conspiracies, while the imperialist use the vileness of this regime to justify its murderous projects. They are in fact one and the same, each strengthening the other. But the fact that masses can make mistakes and may fall prey to reactionary slogans does not mean that we can turn a blind eye to those reactionary mercenary groups that are organised to slip such slogans into people's protests and demonstrations. Slogans in support of the monarchy, racist or chauvinist utterances against the Palestinians, or demands that the Iranian regime to stop its support for those fighting Zionism in the region, are in fact peddled by reactionary groups inside Iran who are mostly paid agents of US imperialism, Israeli Zionists and the Saudi monarchy. Those who cover up this fact are probably exactly the same ones who are already lined up for the imperialist project of regime change in Iran. Why would the urban poor suddenly find the wishes of the likes of Trump, Netanyahu or Sheikh Salman as their own demands?

Some of the above suspect commentators make the excuse that, by these reactionary slogans, people were simply demanding that the funds spent on the Islamic regime's Middle East adventures must be used to improve people's living standards in Iran. But, even according to the wildest imperialist estimates, the Iranian regime is spending a total of less than \$6 billion annually on these interventions – which is less than 1.5% of the government's annual budget. The Saudi government alone spends twice that amount *every month* for its genocide in Yemen and in funding its various terrorist murderers in the region, the evidence for which is constantly covered up by US imperialism and its allies. We will witness similar protests in the near future and will most likely also see the same machinations by external pro-imperialist reactionaries. We have to expose these reactionary projects, and educate and urge the masses on not allowing these black bands to use them as a cover for their conspiracies.

Let us emphasise that none of the above mean that we should question the genuine nature of protests by the Iranian people. Even if they are all strongly influenced by imperialism, we should not abandon the masses. We can only criticise and expose these reactionary slogans when we ourselves are at the forefront in the struggles against the regime. As socialists, we will always be alongside the oppressed. Moreover, the most noticeable feature of the recent events was the fact that, as the protests spread to other cities, these reactionary slogans were pushed to the background.

We must also warn against the gratuitous violence and arson witnessed in some of these demonstrations. It is understandable how anger and desperation can push the people to extreme actions, but we should not forget the role of “agent provocateurs” in Iranian protests. In some of the videos where this violence is shown, it is very curious how most of the perpetrators wear similar cloths in similar colours – as if in uniform. But this is a well known tactic of the security forces (of both the Iranian regime and of imperialist forces) that has been used in many other countries. These agents have to appear in a way that makes them recognisable by "their own people" in order not to be arrested or disrupted by mistake. The Iranian regime, for example, uses these violent acts as a justification for its own violence against the demonstrators.

## The Way Forward

The best way to counter bourgeois regime changes from above as they did in 1979 to hijack a popular revolution is to constantly highlight the real demands of the masses, the vast majority of whom today are made up of workers, toilers and the oppressed. They are not as well delineated and categorised as in say a more advanced capitalist society, but relatively speaking they represent the same groupings. Landless and poor peasants from the countryside, the underclass and the permanently unemployed urban poor, the numerous so-called "smallholders" make up, in addition to the Iranian working class, the overwhelming majority of the Iranian population. Of course unless the working class, by its better organisation and political leadership, can lead the other layers, they can also become major social forces for demagogic bourgeois alternatives.

Since the 1979 revolution, the Iranian working class has grown from around 4.5 million to about 14 million. Before 1979, the vast majority of it was formed in the previous decade, and hardly had any traditions of independent class organisations. But after almost four decades of struggle against the Islamic regime, the working class now has a lot more fighting energy and organised power than it has ever had.

In today's Iran, only the socialists can represent the real interest of the masses, against both domestic factions of the regime or the various imperialist-managed interventions. We must make sure that the next revolutionary crisis is not manipulated or dominated by these reactionary alternatives. In fact, they are not even twins; they are intertwined. In these global times, "external" reaction already exists inside all the "internal" factions. Each of the current Islamic alternatives already carries a certain international flavour. We have pro-British, pro-American or even pro-Russian mullahs already labelled. And in the exiled opposition we have every blend of bourgeois constitutionalism that Western civilization ever produced, from constitutional monarchy to Iranian, democratic, secular or even a Green republic. What the current protests demonstrated is that the narrative currently at number one is the demand for an "Iranian Republic" (as opposed to the "Islamic Republic"). None of the other alternatives has yet had a substantial influence. The "Iranian Republic" is a demand which could soon become the battle cry of a left-of-centre populism of a really right wing military regime, to crush the next revolution. It is already popular amongst Ahmadinejad supporters. This is basically the same "republic" for the *nouveau riche*, but with the mullahs pushed a bit more to the background. Not so much in-your-face, as it were! An example of the brainless nature of politics in our upper circles is the way that many anti-government Iranian TV stations abroad have even helped to popularise this slogan, some admiring its anti-Arab connotations.

We socialists on the other hand promote the struggles of the masses for democratic rights and social control of production and distribution. Steadfastly insisting on this basic choice is the only way to beat all reactionary conspiracies that they have already cooked up for us or are in the process of being cooked up. The main trick is to hide the class content of the government. They always hide behind vague and empty slogans to hide their desire for a regime change from one section of the ruling class to another. The way to hijack the next Iranian revolution is to cut its throat from the start, i.e. to deprive it of its very reason to exist, a governmental change. Therefore those currents that ask for a regime change, without specifying the class content of what replaces it, are indeed collaborators of the next counter revolution. Confused and empty petty bourgeois demands such as "a revolutionary democratic republic" or even "a soviet republic", without clarifying its class content, play the same role. Let us not forget that the Stalinist-Maoist demands against "dependent capitalism" paved the way for Khomeini's counter revolution in 1979. We

socialists must ensure that the main demand of the left in the next revolution is for a workers' government.

Currently however the most important demand to popularise is the demand for a democratic and revolutionary constituent assembly. We cannot simply unite around the slogan for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. We are already witnessing how bourgeois currents are trying to avoid this demand, by promising the masses a referendum, thus paving the way once more to depriving the masses of their sovereignty. This demand can also help unite all the democratic and anti-capitalist forces in Iran. Obviously, we socialists could never agree with the bourgeoisie over a governmental slogan. They will not accept our class-based demands, and we should not reduce our demands to a common bourgeois denominator, which could only mean reducing our demands to the level of bourgeois deceptions. It is vital for the left to popularise this demand and prevent the capitalist counter revolution imposing a regime from above.

## **The Iranian Left**

The recent events also highlighted the sorry state of the Iranian left. There was hardly any evidence of the presence of left groups in any of the demonstrations, except for those at Tehran university. Of course we do not have access to all the reports, and our considerations maybe subjective, but the known evidence from tens of videos proves the absence of the left groups and leftist demands. The situation of the Iranian left is far worse than it was before the 1979 revolution. Its social weight and influence has greatly diminished. After the defeat of 1979 revolution, the ensuing disintegration of the Iranian organised left, with its deep roots in Stalinism and Maoism, has resulted in a total disarray. Most of the larger groups have now simply become parts of a sect-producing factory. There are now more than 100 sects labelling themselves with all sorts of fanciful and radical names, but of no political significance, and with no social roots. The ones which make the biggest noise are simply those that have betrayed their own red lines and have now joined the imperialist camp of conspiracies. If previously they tail-ended the Islamic reaction in the name of "anti-imperialism", many of them are now the stooges of the same imperialism against the Islamic republic.

At a time when a pending revolutionary crisis is facing us, we do not even have a group of a hundred people that could represent revolutionary socialism. If the left does not wake up and take the necessary steps to reconstitute a new left soon, a very dark future is awaiting us. If the main reason for the defeat of the 1979 revolution was the inability of a large section of the left to recognise the main counter-revolutionary danger, today they are knowingly capitulating before the real fight has even started.

The reactions of some of the sects to the recent events indicates the sorry state of our left. First were the pointless and ridiculous slogans that each sect announced in order to justify their own existence, and to compete with the other sects. Sects see in real movements either their own image, or the absence of it. Thus many of them bemoaned the absence of the revolutionary party, while at the same time giving instructions and directions to the masses as if they were that very same absent party!

One sect promised that the "revolution of the starving masses" to be an "immediate precursor" to the complete overthrow of the regime. Others called on workers to intervene and organise an insurrection. Another saw definite signs of an "armed and violent uprising", calling on their supporters to take up armed struggle (while the "leaders"

themselves are enjoying "peaceful" politics abroad)! The jokers were those instructing the working class to utilise their "clandestine committees" to organise a general strike. How the working class can organise a general strike by clandestine committees was left to your own imagination! This call for a general strike was taken up by a number of other sects too. Even some of the reformist currents were dusting up and republishing their old articles on the subject, so as not to fall behind. When everything else fails, why not go the full Monty, and call for a general strike!

But the Oscar for theatrical politics must go to the so-called "Communist Workers' Party of Iran" (one of a half a dozen "communist parties" that we enjoy), which is neither communist, nor anything to do with the workers, nor indeed anything like a party. This is our most "modern" of the old Maoist left, now just a stooge of Zionism and US imperialism. It for example supported the US bombing of Afghanistan. It has given the racist and colonialist state of Israel the accolade of being "the most democratic state in the Middle East", and it believes that getting financial help from Zionism as "smart politics"! In one of its numerous daily communiqués (as if they are the Bolshevik party on the eve of the October revolution), addressing the military forces of the regime they said: "Do not shoot the people! Put down your arms and join the people!" What can one say to this? There is not one person in Iran who is naive enough as to think that the regime's armed thugs would not shoot their own mother for the caliphate. So why make such a ridiculous call? This is of course window dressing for their financial backers. If you search the monarchist sites you will see that Reza Pahlavi (the pretender to the throne) made exactly the same call. But he wants to show his Saudi backers that he still has some support in the army. Our latter day Stalinists are simply mimicking it, to show their unity with all the pro-imperialist opposition.

In contrast to all these super radicals, the prize for the most pitiful advice must go to our Euro-communists. Acting as though they are sitting in Rouhani's cabinet, they called on the government to publish the list of those bankers responsible for the collapse of the private pension funds. They called this introducing the "social element" into the movement. Thus when the masses are calling the entire regime from top to bottom a corrupt regime, our reformers are advising the government to publish a few names to console the masses!

What is even more alarming is the fact that a few weeks later all these sects will forget everything they have said, and go back to their routine of inactivity issuing declarations on various anniversaries. A few years ago, a call was made from inside the working class for a national workers' movement. We should tell these sects that, instead of giving advice to the working class on what to do, could you first explain what you have actually done in the past few years to make that a possibility? Indeed the best thing most of these sects can do for the working class is to liquidate themselves.

## **The Next Period**

The contradiction between the state and its political regime has reached fever pitch. Who will replace the "supreme leader" has a direct effect on how the capitalist system can resolve the current crisis and survive. During Ahmadinejad's presidency – that is, more than a decade ago – the World Bank estimated that Iran needed at least 700 billion dollars in foreign loans or investments, just for its current projects. This sum is probably now well over a trillion dollars. In its most optimistic projections, Rouhani's government has

forecast for 60 billion dollars of foreign investment annually. In reality it has so far not achieved anything above 5 billion dollars annually. This figure does not even match the flight of capital from Iran abroad. Of course if the nuclear deal holds the Europeans will certainly want to invest in Iran but will they be able to hold their line in the face of US sanctions remains to be seen.

Iranian capitalism has only two solutions; either bring under control all the main financial resources of the state that are now under the caliphate of the supreme leader, and thereby force its various "foundations" to pay taxes ... or multiply the foreign investments a hundredfold. Either of these is simply total fantasy. The first possibility would require the complete dismantling of the client caliphate state with its tens of millions of sponsored supporters – and there is more chance that Mr Trump will give all his money to the poor than that anyone can make a mullah pay back what he owes. After all the recent protests that shook the regime to its foundations, one of the most abhorrent of the mullahs, the Friday Prayers leader in Tehran, Ayatollah Kazem Sedighi, even complained that the government is not devoting a *greater* part of its budget to the religious foundations.

The second solution requires an unprecedented growth of foreign investment in Iran, which seems extremely unlikely, especially in the current unstable political situation. Trump has put the nuclear deal in limbo, which is really not very different in its effect on foreign investment to complete annulment. We can only expect a worsening of the crisis, i.e. an increase in poverty and unemployment. The recent upheavals proved that even a caliphate cannot suppress mass protests of such nature and scale. The next uprising will be even more co-ordinated and better organised.

Furthermore, the actual extent of the financial crisis in Iran has not yet fully shown itself. The main causes of the crisis can only intensify. The entire banking system faces a real danger of collapse. Many of the financial institutions inherited from the Ahmadinejad era are nothing more than Ponzi schemes. As a result, in the next few years more and more people are going to lose all their savings, and more and more pension funds may disappear into thin air. On the other hand, Trump's administration has given the blank cheque to its two main enforcers, the Zionists and the Saudis, to create more and more chaos in the Middle East, and create more and more and even darker ISIS like black bands in the region to force the Iranian regime to expend even more for mere survival. The result of this domestic and regional crisis is going to be nothing more than greater repression and an increasing militarisation of the whole society.

The mullahs themselves have often said that Islam needs swords for its survival. So we can only expect more religious fascism. On the other hand, as the demonstrators said in many of the recent protests, "the game is up": neither the fundamentalist nor the reformist demagoguery will work anymore. When the masses come onto the scene, the era for politics from above is over. More than anything, the recent uprisings were evident proof for the actuality of the revolution. The inability of those at the top to react with one voice to the recent protests shows that the unity inside the system is also breaking up.

As the history of the previous revolution has already shown, under such conditions you can be certain that various capitalist factions from within or without are already putting together a Plan B. When the previous revolutionary crisis started, it took them a couple of years to place Khomeini in its leadership. I believe such "talks" are already underway, and the various international players are also teaming up to go behind one or the other solutions. We must therefore be more than ever diligent in our fight against all such solutions from above. We must help popularise the need for a revolutionary and

democratic constituent assembly to replace the current regime. Our most urgent task is to prepare for a better and more conscious intervention in the next wave of protests. We need to make sure that the Iranian workers movement has a more organised and national presence in the next wave. And we must make sure that the class character of the revolutionary government we demand is more clear and specific.

For a workers' and toilers' government, and a socialist revolution!

Jan 2018