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Iran

Iran: What happened after March 8 1979

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An interview by Shirin Shalkooi.

Can you introduce yourself ?

I'm Fariba, I'm a communist women and a member of the *8 March Women's Organisation (Iran-Afghanistan)* [1]. It is an independent and democratic organisation with a revolutionary approach. By « democratic », we mean that women from different ideology and backgrounds can be a member of our organisation. « Independent » means that we are separate from the men and from political parties or governmental institutions. Women of Afghanistan are the most oppressed women in Iran, they are not considered as citizens in the country so a lot of Afghan women living in Iran won't call themselves Iranian.

The statistics show that violence against women is increasing. In 2014, there were a series of acid attacks in the city of Isfahan by men who judged that women didn't wear the hijab properly. By then, we understood that we needed to build a coalition with other women to act in the long run and not just occasionally. Two years ago, we started to work in a campaign named Karzar (#kaarzaar) [2] to fight state, social and domestic violence against women in Iran. The campaign involved women from the 8 March organisation but also other activists, women's organisations and leftists.

For us, revealing the link between the three different forms of violence – social, domestic and state - is really essential. If we use only the term « violence against women », leftists often focus only on the violence of the state and ignore domestic violence. When you speak about social violence (that is violence in public spaces) or domestic violence, some feminists have a tendency to downplay state violence. We argue that there are different spheres of violence that work together and reinforce each other and that we have to fight them all.

Another important political position of Karzar is that we all agree that there is no possibility that women's situation can improve without overthrowing the Islamic regime of Iran. There are other political organisations in the opposition of the regime such as the People's Mujaheddin (National Council of Resistance of Iran) who are pro-imperialist or the Monarchists, but we are totally different from them too. Karzar is a coalition in exile, most of the women live in Belgium, England, The Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Turkey and Sweden. Some women in Iran do follow us but we don't make any official contact because it is too dangerous for them.

What are the key points of the situation in Iran ?

After the takeover of the Islamic regime in February 1979, we always had resistance in the society. But, last year, in Dey mah [3] there was a major class uprising that changed the whole political atmosphere. Before that, the hegemony of the political ideology of opposition was reformism. If you wanted to do something, everyone was answering you "we need time", "we can change something with another President"... We changed some faces like Moussavi, Khatami or Rohani but it didn't change anything in our political situation because all of them defend the interests of the ruling class.

The Dey protests were really important because nobody could believe the huge anger of the people who shouted that they didn't want the Islamic regime anymore. Poor people, ethnic minorities, women and men, took to the streets in hundred of cities and villages that, as a political activist, I didn't even know existed. It was a snub to the reformists who spread the idea that the working class and less educated people support the regime. Since the Dey protests, the reformists lost some power and it is the best moment to talk about changes and alternatives.

This year, 2019, is the 40th anniversary of the takeover of the Revolution by the Islamic regime. At that time, the Islamic fundamentalists took the power but the revolution wasn't made by them. It started with leftist, communist and secular organisations. The leftists did a big mistake by thinking that they could go hand in hand with the Islamists against the Shah [4] and the imperialist powers. Because most Iranian people are religious, they thought that they could use Khomeini [5] as an Islamic ideological leader for the revolution and that they will be able to change the society after it. But Khomeini had his own plans, he wanted to build an Islamic State and the Hezbollah party [6].

After two years of political freedom just after the revolution, the regime began to forbid all other political parties. Over 7 years, they arrested and killed thousands and thousands of activists and political opponents. We lost them physically but we also lost their experiences, this is a big loss for the young generations who have lived only under the hegemony of the Islamic regime. Most of the rest of the « generation of the revolution » is either in exile, or not politically active anymore. In the nineties, the regime started to give some freedom for reformist parties to be built but not parties built by the people, they were parties, organizations and unions built by the reformist part of the government, parties built from the top and controlled by the regime. They made fake « trade unions » and fake « organisations » to control and profile activists.

Ten years ago, before the «Iranian green movement» in 2009, we had a movement of students, workers, teachers and women. After the uprising of December 2017, all those movements and especially the environmentalist, the women, the drivers, the nurses and the teachers, became more radical. For example, there are new unofficial trade unions trying to stay independent from the state like the workers struggle of the sugar refinery of Haft Tapeh.

This radicalism doesn't come from nowhere. During the last ten years, the Iranian regime had to establish more and more relationship with western advanced capitalist countries. They call themselves anti-imperialist but this is just varnish. They had the illusion that those relationship will help them overcome the effects of the worldwide capitalist crisis.

Rohani signed the nuclear deal in 2015 with the P5+1 (America, Russia, China, United-Kingdom, France and Germany) which brought more capital and enabled them to sign official contracts with the cartels. But, in every country, neoliberal policies increase the gap between the rich and the poor. In May 2018, Trump announced the withdrawal of US from the agreement and re-established strong economic sanctions. Almost overnight, the prices of essential goods tripled. Can you imagine that? You cannot find products imported from the west like Pampers [7] or women's sanitary products anymore.

Some workers didn't get paid for one year (one or two months pay during the year is the best anyone can expect). This affects both the public and the private sectors and in fact it is really difficult to make a distinction between them in Iran. For example, numerous guards of Sepah-e Pasdaran, the paramilitary army of the regime, are the owners of so-called «private» companies. A lot of small companies had to close down and a lot of people are jobless for years. We see situations that we never faced, some people sleep in empty graves in the cemeteries because they don't have other shelter.

The climate and environmental questions are also important. Scientists say that many parts of Iran will soon become uninhabitable. The situations in the countryside is generally worse because some people don't have access to water. Water wars have started in Iran. In Isfahan last week, we could see that they had water again in the famous Zayendeh river but it is mostly for the tourism. The decision makers bring water from other cities and villages, mostly from the areas of Iran where Arabs live. The environmental problem mixes with the national question because the water is taken from poor region where people of the minorities don't have any rights. Isfahan is a good example because it has many steel plants which need a lot of water but the city is in the middle of the desert. Can you imagine? It is really crazy.

The Shah wanted to build industries for the prestige of the city, to bring power in the center. Now, on the one hand (for example in Haft-Tappe) if they want to keep the industries, it takes all the water. And in the other hand, if they close them, there are five thousand workers who lose their job. These are some examples of the conflicts between the needs and welfare of people and the neoliberal agenda of the Islamic regime.

The crisis that capitalism has brought upon in Iran is not just economic, it is also political. There are contradictions inside the Iranian regime but also between the Iranian regime and western countries and between the Iranian regime and other powers in the Middle East. Inside the regime itself, the government don't know how to solve the crisis and there is no unity as there were 30 years ago. Historically, there are two main political positions. There are the ones who think that we need to reinforce the ideologic varnish of the Islamic regime and keep allies like Russia and China against « imperialism » because the opposition against America is important for the supporters and sympathisers of the Islamic regime. On the other hand, there is the "Rohani part" who think we have to develop more relations with the west to fulfil the neoliberal agenda of the regime: to fit themselves into the global market by providing a cheap labor source as well as providing a big market of consumers.

After Trump's last move, both positions are in crisis. We fear a war with America but it is not easy to predict. I think we are already at war, not inside Iran but in Syria, in Afghanistan, in Yemen, in Iraq, in Palestine, in Lebanon. Everywhere the Iranian regime makes war to strengthen its front against America and its allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and sometimes Turkey. There is a strong nationalist tendency in Iran and a lot of Iranians are racist against Arabs, Afghans and other people from ethnic minorities. However, the regime does not acknowledge these complexities: for the Iranian regime, either you are with them or you are with America. This dynamic is really important both for the Iranian and the American regime because it prevents people thinking about alternatives.

About anti-imperialism, one of the biggest mistakes of the communists was that they didn't understand that the essence of imperialism is based on relations of production. Some communists think imperialism is only the USA, because it is the world's first military power and they attack everywhere. But imperialism is relations of production and the Iranian regime was never anti-imperialist. From the very beginning, they had the exact same interests in international economic relationships as defined by imperialism. Some parties like PTB [\[8\]](#) and other currents make that mistake, but they didn't experience the kind of revolution we did.

The Iranian regime reproduces imperialistic economical relationships with its neighbours, for example in Syria. So, they cannot call themselves "anti-imperialist". For that, they would need to be socialist, which Iran has never been so far. It's a very big mistake of some parts of the Western left to support this regime and consider Iranian regime to be an anti-imperialist regime based on its fake facade. Another common mistaken approach towards regimes like Iran is the argument of cultural relativism and arguing that "Iranians are not ready for socialism, or anti-capitalism, or women's liberation". But it's not true!

Can you talk about the situation of the women and why March is an important month for the women's movement in Iran ?

The problem of the economic and class gap firstly and directly affects women. Women are the first to be under economic pressure, the first victims of poverty, as everywhere. Poverty and the prolétariat are feminine. In Iran, it's the same.

In most Third World countries, we still have a mix between slavery, feudalism and the modern capitalist wage system. Also, the Islamic State uses religion as an ideological tool of power and domination. The Iranian Islamic regime was the first to build an Islamic State with God as the ultimate leader. All these relationships support and feed the subordination of women that we call the patriarchal oppression. The Imams updated the tenets of Islam from thousands of years ago to use it in a "modern" capitalist state but a lot of the Sharia laws are still based on slavery

and feudalism. For example, a father has the right to kill his wife or daughter if he suspects of having sexual relations (with a man?).

Women are trapped in a contradiction because the wage system and neoliberalism give them more right to leave home, to go to work or to study. But, on the other hand Islamic fundamentalist ideology considers their place is to stay at home. That is why the regime imposes the hijab, so that women have to show that when they go out of their husband or father's home, they are still under their control, the control of the state and the control of God. The hijab functions as a portable prison for women.

It is not easy to be a woman under these contradictions. Some revolutionary communists don't understand that laws have a real impact on people's lives. If women want to resist and fight the Islamic regime, they firstly need some basic minimum bourgeois democratic rights to be full citizens. In Iran, when someone kills somebody, he has to pay an amount of money (called Diya— blood money). This money is halved when the victim is a woman. If a woman gives testimony in court, her words has half of the value of a man's words. This means that you are officially considered as half of a man. You don't have the right to study, to work or to travel without your father or your husband permission. Of course, a lot of women do it, especially women from the big cities, but men potentially have the right to control women and prevent them from doing any of those things. They also have the right to rape and to beat them. If a stranger does rape you, he can easily use the argument that you were not wearing your hijab properly or that you didn't have permission to go out. If a woman is married, it is likely that having a relationship with another man would lead to sentencing to death by stoning.

Two weeks after Khomeini came to power, the first reactionary sign was that women were forced to cover themselves in public. All over the world, the very first attacks of the reactionary forces primarily target women. It is the case in Afghanistan with the Taliban, in Iraq with Daesh (ISIS), in America with Trump.

In Iran, it was in March 1979. During six days, thousands of women went out in the streets to protest against the Ayatollah's fatwa. Compared to the other demonstrations during the revolution, this one was not the biggest but it was mostly women. They were attacked by Islamic militants with acid, guns and razor blades. We call this women's demonstration "the birth of the new women's movement" because it was the first time in the history of the country that women went in the streets to fight for gender issues.

Women went in the streets for the revolution, for economic reasons, against the war and over many other social questions, but against gender oppression. They were really, really, brave to oppose Khomeini at that time because almost everyone accepted him as a leader and almost all the parties considered him as a progressive anti-imperialist leader. Women were the first to understand that the regime was reactionary and they had a famous slogan: "we didn't make revolution to go backward, we made revolution to go forward".

This history is poorly known and not properly conveyed. We try to keep it alive with the women's movement. There are some books, articles, interviews and also the small movie "Année zéro" [\[9\]](#) made by the French Movement for Women's Liberation (MLF). The women's political role at that moment was not recognised by the communist, socialist and secular people. Unfortunately, back then, in some leaflets of political forces and even leftists, women were called "bourgeois", "monarchist", "sympathisers of the Shah family, Ashraf or Farah", "bitch". After the attacks on the women, the regime starts to attack ethnic minorities; Turkman, Kurds, Arab, gay people, and other minority groups. And then, after all that, left parties. As told by a German poet "first they came for ... then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me".

As women, we have to resist against many things and fight for everything: for what we want to wear, to eat, to say, for the way we want to be or to act, for the right to go to school, to come home late, to play sport,... From first thing in the morning, you start "against my father, my brother, my husband". The regime controls your bed, your privacy: "with

whom you are, why, how long and what is the result?”. When you resist everything, you are like a soldier who is permanently on-call. Women fight in their own creative ways to survive in our daily life and also to go forward, to change their condition. Step by step. 60 percent of the students in university are women which means that they want to be in the public spaces. Dey mah was important because when the whole society is against the regime, it gives you more driving force, power and place to show that you refuse the control of your body.

The women who took off their scarves in public places did so not only to have a photograph taken but to stay there, to fight, to convey a message. These are women who want to overthrow the regime. For me, as a revolutionary woman whose concern is women's emancipation, acquiring the right to wear what we like is not the goal, though it is a very basic right that everybody should have. Our fight against compulsory Hijab is not limited to the right to control what we wear, but to choose our clothing has another, deeper level and that is the concept of Hijab. The hijab has a special function, it is the flag of the Islamic regime on women's body. It is the symbol of women subordination, treating women as a commodity and as sex objects. The patriarchal oppression in the capitalist system of exploitation needs to control women's body as a tool for reproduction. It is not just a question of religion and ideology, it has actual material basis. If we get a secular regime it will not automatically mean that the control of women's body will stop.

Why do you think we need an international struggle?

We need to learn from each other, not to copy. We can't dictate our way of fighting to the others but we need to learn from our respective achievements. With Karzar, it is really important for us to strengthen our voices. We don't support either the Iranian Islamic regime, or the imperialist intervention.

I don't want Belgian women to fight against the Iranian regime in Iran, we can do that. I do want them to fight against their own regime in Belgium, that is their role. If they fight well, it will be easier for us to fight there. Imperialism works because anti-imperialist movements in western countries are weak. If the women's movement has a revolutionary face in Belgium, not a reformist one, of course we will get more victories in Iran. For me, that is the meaning of internationalism. I don't fight only for the freedom of the Iranian people. If we overthrow the Iranian regime in a revolutionary way, we open a window for the people of many Middle Eastern and islamic fundamentalist countries to fight against their regimes.

We have a lot to teach feminist women in the western countries. If they learn the lessons about the reactionary forces in Iran, they can understand the danger of the far-right. Internationalism is not begging western feminist to come to our demonstrations and make speeches for us. Of course, it is nice and it shows support, but we need more than that. We need a united comprehensive international fight against the patriarchal class systems all over the world.

Support : join the rally in Brussels in front of the Iranian embassy, Friday 8 March at 2.30pm [here](#)

Further readings :

Dominique Lerouge, ESSF (article 43456), Iran : 39 ans après le 8 mars 1979 :
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article43456>

Frieda Afary, ESSF (article 47941), Iran: Ongoing Labor Strikes, Women's Protests and Ideas for International Solidarity :
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47941>

Alliance of Middle East Socialists

<https://www.allianceofmesocialists.org/womens-emancipation-gender-and-sexual-minorities/>

[1] www.8mars.com .

[2] karzar means campaign in farsi

[3] During December 2017.

[4] The then monarch of Iran.

[5] He was the first Ayatollah (Supreme leader) of Iran.

[6] The party of God.

[7] a major brand of disposable nappies.

[8] Parti de Travailleurs Belgique, the Belgian Worker's Party.

[9] year zero