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Iran

# A radical political turning point

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**In the history books of modern Iran, the first week of January 2018, which saw a wave of popular uprisings in many cities across the country, will be recorded as a new historical milestone. A turning point after which the Iranian political scene was no longer the same.**

Regardless of the immediate consequences of this event:

- either the movement of the workers and the people will have a decisive impact on the evolution of the movement;
- or it will be crushed in a bloody fashion.

In the meantime, one thing is certain: it will be impossible for the current regime to continue to govern as before. The recent protests have undermined all the political, cultural and ideological foundations of the capitalist-Islamic regime, as well as the myth of what is called the "Islamic revolution".

## Facts and figures

The protests that began on December 28, 2017 in Mashhad, Iran's second largest city, quickly spread to more than 80 cities, including Tehran, the capital, and Qum, the religious capital. The participants were mostly young people under 30, but in some cases parents with their children. Some government buildings and state banks were set on fire by protesters. Portraits of Khamenei and Khomeini, the two symbols of the existing regime, were burned along with the flag of the regime.

Compared with the mass demonstrations that took place in 2009 after Ahmadinejad's fraudulent election as president, these demonstrations present several important differences:

- 1 ° From the first day, they directly opposed poverty and systemic corruption;
- 2 ° They included the broad participation of the working class (proletariat), many unemployed and retired people, men and women;
- 3 ° From the third day, they quickly became politicized and radicalized. There were slogans calling for the end of the Islamic Republic, the death of Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Rohani (the liberal translation of Rohani is "the clergy") and "the guardians of the revolution", as well as the end of Iran's military intervention in Syria and Lebanon;
- 4 ° In some cases, women bravely removed their headscarves or veils in public places, and encouraged others to follow their example;
- 5 ° After the shock and confusion of the first two days, the regime and all of its tendencies (hard, fundamentalist, moderate and reformers) decided to violently crush the mass protest by any means. The balance sheet was heavy: according to the authorities, 27 dead on the streets, 4,972 arrests, including to date 12 deaths under torture in prison and 493 still in detention.

Since the 1979 revolution, this uprising has been the first major event that bears the mark of the class struggle and the absence of any religious sign, symbol, personality or slogan. The demonstrations were based on those who have no place in the dominant discourse: the voiceless ones, without leader, guide or organization. The crowds who mobilized were a mixture of workers, students, young people and pensioners.

Never had the poorest, the marginalized layers of the cities, the masses usually silent and discreet, been so numerous in the streets: precarious workers, street vendors, seasonal or temporary workers, unemployed.

These events had an explosive dynamic because of their geographical extent, the radical slogans and the diversity of approaches. This is an unprecedented phenomenon since the 1979 revolution. The rules of the political game have been suddenly changed. Those who had been relegated to the depths of normal politics suddenly stood up and imposed their language and their way of doing things.

## The political economy of the riots

Those who explain that "invisible hands" were supposedly behind the revolt should start by looking at the quite visible hand of the economic and social crisis. That is what sparked off the socio-economic and political riots. All dictators facing social crises speak of "conspiracy". They are followed by some of their campist friends who claim to be "the anti-imperialist left". The only "conspiracy" is that of the bourgeois-clerical system whose logic is contrary to the interests of the majority of the population. The accelerated process of proletarianization of small producers, as well as the extent of the collapse of the middle layers, have created a deep gap between capital and labour.

Without a doubt, the deep roots of this crisis lie in the capitalist mode of production and in globalization. But in Iran, what has increased the gravity of the crisis and made it explosive is the deployment of a neoliberal militarist economic policy during the last two decades.

The process of redistributing the country's wealth to the capitalist-mafia gangs who hold political power, as well as the astronomical corruption at the expense of the very impoverished working classes, began in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the war between Iran and Iraq. This redistribution of wealth has taken place through an accelerated and savage accumulation of capital based on the destruction of small farms and craft enterprises, massive imports and the privatization of public goods at derisory prices.

In January 2017, economic sanctions against Iran were lifted following the signing, on July 14, 2015, of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the major powers. Rohani and his government then boasted of having achieved a huge political and especially economic success. The Iranian economists in his service, neoliberal disciples of the Chicago School, of Hayek and Friedman, presented figures extolling the successes of Rohani's economic policy.

And today what do we see? Riots against poverty!

"Well said, old mole. How can you work so fast underground?" (*Hamlet*, Shakespeare). This blind animal makes its way stubbornly, patiently digging its tunnels in the darkness of history. It then appears, sometimes in bright sunlight. It embodies the refusal, in difficult times, to resign oneself to any idea of an "end of history".

## When the masks fall

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This movement, which particularly targeted the Supreme Leader Khamenei, has many causes.

1 ° The terrible fall in the standard of living of the workers, of various popular classes, and of the petty bourgeoisie;

2 ° The disappointment of the social base of the regime in the face of the evolution of the situation, and its frustration with the incapacity of the regime (all of the currents within it) to improve living conditions;

3 ° The shock caused by the non-fulfillment of Rohani's electoral promises, as well as the rapid shift of the government towards a right-wing and ultra-liberal policy, from the first measures taken at the beginning of his second presidential term;

4 ° The emergence of a new impoverished layer, the colloquial term for which can be translated as "those who are cleaned out". These are hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who have lost their meager savings after large-scale banking scams, committed with the complicity of the government.

5 ° These scams coincide with the revelation of the astronomical level of corruption of those in power.

Slogans like "Our country is home to thieves, it is the most corrupt in the world" underline the disgust of the population against the astronomical levels of corruption of the regime.

Despite stiff censorship, the growing rivalry between the regime's factions, especially after the signing of the nuclear deal, has allowed corruption to be taken up by the media. People were particularly irritated by the enormous amounts (a third of the country's budget) diverted to clerical institutions. In these difficult times, the vast majority of the population believes that this money should have been spent on social assistance. It is therefore not surprising that besides the slogans against the whole regime, there were others that targeted the clergy as a group: "people beg, clerics take themselves for God", or "Mullah, shame on you, let go of the country".

The long-awaited moment of a historic settling of accounts with the clergy seems to have arrived.

6 ° The earthquake, measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale, that struck western Kurdistan last autumn showed incompetence and indifference on the part of the administration, as well as the total mistrust of the people in its ability to deal with it. Within 24 hours, residents of Kermanshah, the nearest town to the epicentre of the earthquake, sent more than 1,000 trucks to help the victims abandoned by the government. Their example was followed by people from many other regions. It was as if people had lost hope that the government would have a realistic and effective response to the disaster.

In the end, the recent uprising is the result of the convergence of all the points mentioned above. They are the ones which have dealt a heavy blow to the hopes of the people. The people has become aware that no faction of the regime is better than the other. It has understood that participation in the electoral masquerade, leaving no other choice than that between the bad and the worst, could not solve anything. This understanding has put an end to the scenario that had lasted for more than twenty years.

The crowds who took to the streets and burned the regime's flag and the portraits of its leaders no longer accept the electoral games, the political manipulations and the deceptions of the system. After decades of their voices being suffocated, their cries sound the alarm.

# The weak points of the movement

The recent uprisings were spontaneous and unorganized. Thousands of nuclei and horizontal networks organized around civil rights activists and social activists played a leading role in initiating and coordinating movements.

In the era of satellites and the internet, the use of new means of communication has provided additional means for developing and organizing collective movements and facilitating the expression of spontaneity and horizontality.

This is particularly the case in countries with a dictatorial regime where political, trade union and associative organizations are embryonic. This has been the case during recent events in Iran. Their spontaneous character was probably at the beginning an important point of support, to start the movement and to make it safe. But it does not guarantee either the persistence or the development of mobilization. Its dispersed and disparate leadership, while reflecting the social and political diversity of the population, is not necessarily a response to the need for convergence and consolidation.

In the mobilizations of early January 2018, there was a convergence around the slogans designating what the demonstrators wanted to see disappear: "No to..."; "Down with..."; "Death to..." etc. But the "positive slogans" about what they want to appear were still missing. These mobilizations remained a protest movement that knew what it did not want anymore, but had not yet found what it wanted in its place.

In the absence of organization and leadership representing a clear progressive alternative to the regime, these events are destined to:

• fail and suffer repression,

• be manipulated by foreign interests,

• be hijacked by the first populist demagogue to come along.

It is at this stage that many political forces representing antagonistic class interests will try to take control of the movement and mislead it for their own purposes.

It is not surprising that Donald Trump - who two months ago banned Iranian citizens from entering the United States, accusing them of terrorism - suddenly became an "ardent friend" of the revolted peoples of Iran.

Not surprising either that Reza Pahlavi, the son of the dethroned shah (who has spent the last four years in Las Vegas nightclubs and casinos), pretends to be on the side of the Iranian labour movement and allows himself to launch a call for a general strike!

If we want this uprising, like so many others, not to fizzle out like a spark, but to endure and succeed, we must overcome its weak points. Achieving historical, political and class consciousness, as well as the capacities that are proper to a collective movement, are determining factors in the survival and consolidation of the movement. There lies the importance of independent, organic and persistent leadership. Not only in its loyalty to the political and class interests of the exploited, but also in the fight against attempts at manipulation.

This is not only a condition for the structuring of the present decentralized leadership, but also for responding to the

need to integrate the lessons of past experiences, as well as the development of a class political consciousness with a programme based on the interests of the working masses.

# What now?

It is certain that neither police repression nor demagogic and ideological deception will be able to conceal and resolve the existing contradictions, nor to plug the breach opened by this uprising. We can predict with certainty that the next uprising will not be long in coming.

“On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

Here is the rose, here dance!”

Karl Marx (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*)

Images of the brutal repression against the youth, workers and women of Iran have provoked a wave of indignation around the world. Given the cowardice of the "reformist" bourgeois-clerical oppositionists, and given that the entire system is being challenged from below, the road is now open, but it will be long and difficult.

It is not difficult to discern the reasons. The regime has proved that it has no difficulty in imposing an even more savage repression. The Iranian regime is not only a capitalist regime, but it is also an ideological regime, organized in a fascist way, and it will fight to survive. It has powerful military forces, as well as a well-organized paramilitary militia with very important financial interests.

It is difficult to predict what will happen. However, we can be sure that nothing will be any longer as it was before. It is therefore a very important, delicate and long confrontation. It is essential that those who fight in Iran get broad and effective support from leftist and progressive forces. The struggle for democracy and civil liberties must be one of the dimensions of our common struggles.

Our association, Socialist Solidarity with the Workers in Iran (SSWI), by defending the interests of the Iranian workers, by maintaining a firm and consistent stance, both anti-imperialist and anti-regime, will do its utmost to expand and relay a large campaign of support to the struggles of the Iranian people.

We seek to act with all Iranian and international forces that share these principles. On the other hand, it is not possible to unite with the defenders of one or the other faction of the regime, nor with those who wish for war or foreign sanctions, in the hope of thus avoiding a change from below. We will not suspend our criticism of those who tolerate imperialist war or economic sanctions, measures that are harmful first and foremost to the workers and the popular masses of Iran.

*February 27, 2018*