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As Class Conflict Sharpens in Iran

Some have already forgotten it. Some are relieved to be able to forget it. What was it? CIA plot that got snuffed, as the Supreme Leader put it supremely deceptively? Was it an aberration? A blip?

It was a reminder that time is short, and life is precious: A one-week flash flood of protests by Iranian poor-and-fed-up people across the country, in 80 cities, towns and even some very small towns; these protests voiced grievances that have only one way of being heard: in the streets.

Western ‘anti-imperialist’ and conspiracy-oriented left, European powers with lucrative deals either lined-up or ongoing, international financial centers, and President Rouhani and the whole herd of the so-called reformist and pragmatist factions of the regime, along with their expat mouthpieces, whose collective complicity was exposed unequivocally by this latest uprising of the people – they all can relax. The security forces and the hardliners did what they do best, so everybody can relax.

This latest wave of people’s movement is in fact the continuation of a century-long struggle, though it may have burst onto the scene seemingly out of nowhere. This last episode of people’s resistance to dictatorship that started on Dec. 28 of last year, auspiciously ringing in the new year, lasted a mere week or so, yet we see how this flash movement came as an earthquake that shook the Iranian state out of its self-assured slumber, and opened up more deeply a crack, that deep-seated contradiction, that has been at the foundation of this theocracy.

As short as it was in its lifespan, this latest social upheaval has compelled everybody to get busy providing summations: analysis and evaluation of ‘what happened’, views on the current situation, and how to proceed forward.

International financial institutions had been issuing their recommendations and approvals to the Iranian regime for a long time. The World Bank has approved of the current regime of neoliberalism and austerity that the Iranian government has been instituting in systematic and progressive steps since the 1990s. The IMF has issued its recommendations for reforms of the banking system, and it has warned about the troublesome ramifications of the totally unregulated banking sector that has been operating at an industrial scale in Iran stealing precious little or not-so-little savings people might have put away. The proportion of the bank holdings that stole people’s savings and are insolvent is estimated at 40%.

The so-called Reformist faction of the ruling class in Iran, our equivalent of the Democratic Party in the U.S., had already reached its conclusions years before this latest uprising, and is now in overdrive pushing thread-bare advice, telling people not to be in a rush, be calm and, most importantly, do not resort to any defensive violence, don’t destroy any property, but do depend on the Reformists to look out for the people and protect them from those nasty fundamentalist extremist conservatives who won’t let the Reformists do anything for the people.

But, their game was exposed. They had up to now pretended to have been the protectors of the people, but people saw that their leaked budgets, like the good neoliberals that they are, protected the already-privileged, the state-run foundations, the religious foundations, and the security forces, while the budget decreased the miserly little help that was previously provided for the neediest.

Further, as we witnessed especially in 2016, people have seen Rouhani’s government executing thousands for drug dealing charges, yet god knows how many were simply addicts, or worse, how many journalists, bloggers and political prisoners were thrown into the mix. People are certainly aware of the dire situation of the political prisoner and their mass hunger strike.

People have, on top of all the regular misery they are condemned to suffer, seen that, since the lifting of the sanctions, most of the benefits of the economic growth have gone mostly to the rich and the connected. And it doesn’t help that the rich in Iran, just like the rich in the U.S., really like to throw it in your face about how sweet they got it. These are the

people who've got it good in Iran, not the majority. So, if you're supporting the Islamic Republic, these rich kids are the people you're supporting.

In terms of political actions to be taken by the people, Reformists' advice to the people was mostly this: Of course, you have a right to protest and voice your grievances. But, If the regime's thugs and security forces kill you with impunity, arrest thousands of you with no due process, harass and torment the families of those they killed and force them to read out prepared statements written by security forces on national TV to the effect that their son was not killed by the security forces, if they torture you in jail to get a 'confession' for crimes you never committed, if they kill you in detention and say you committed suicide ... turn the other cheek.

Our Reformists are true disciples of Jesus.

As for the foreign 'interveners', the western powers displayed a clear division in their tactical responses to the Iranian people's uprising. While the detestable Trump administration's lackeys were full of hollow and hypocritical pronouncements in support of the Iranian people's protests (despite having classified Iranian people as potential terrorists through their travel and immigration bans), the European powers were swift in their 'level-headedness'. Macron sounded just like our own 'Reformists', advising all sides to refrain from rash acts (and this, while the regime was busy killing people with impunity, and arresting peaceful protesters by the thousands with no due process), pushing the viewpoint that the best way to protect human rights in Iran is to support and dialogue with the very state that has been denying us any rights and condemning the Iranian people to ruination and political and social abject misery for forty years.

It is of course natural for the French president, a natural-born neoliberal, to come to the aid of fellow neoliberals in Iran. After all, Renault's production levels in Iran just hit a record high in 2017 ([see here](#)). The French car company Peugeot also produces cars in Iran.

Then there is the summation by the people in the streets.

From its head to the smallest bones in its toes, this regime is steeped in violence, thievery and deception. And the working classes know it. To comply with global neo-liberal demands for intensified capital accumulation, an effort that took a giant leap with Ahmadinejad's second term (2009-2013), state subsidies for basic goods and fuel saw a steep drop, and concurrent 'privatization' of state assets transferred increasingly larger portions of the economy to ... institutions run by the regime institutions, or their cronies.

One enterprise that has been gobbling up all that was to be privatized is the Revolution Guards, to the tune of now owning a third of the Iranian economy. Besides having complete control over all military-industrial network of production, the ‘privatized’ telecommunication industry was also ‘bought’ by the Revolution Guards; the same with the radio and television broadcasting system; the same with considerable shares in the auto industry, which are run as joint ventures (with France’s Peugeot or Renault, for example); import/export licenses almost exclusively go to the Revolution Guards or “Khodi” people (those who actively support the theocracy); cronies, basically. The Revolution Guards also run and operate financial institutions. And just like all other governments that need a secret budget, aside from the traditional smuggling communities local to the border regions of Iran (especially in Baluchistan, in the southeast corner of Iran), the state also has a monopoly on smuggled goods (both into and out of Iran), including cigarettes, drugs and alcoholic beverages, all of which can literally be delivered to your house if you have the means.

One effect of the recent uprising of the destitute and the super-exploited was the signal it sent to all the layers of the theocracy. The movement shook the regime to such an extent that even the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has issued statements advising the Revolution Guards to relinquish some of their vast economic holdings so that a few other local capitalists can breathe and expand the regime’s positive hegemony by that much. Back only a couple of years ago, the Revolution Guards were eyeing to gobble up even more of the economy, but now they have to realize that there is such a thing as ‘too greedy’ even for an organization playing body guard for a clerical class that is the definition of ‘leech-like’, as we call them in Persian (zaloo-sefat).

The economic and trade sanctions that were imposed by western powers in fact strengthened the regime’s hold on power, while at the same time impoverishing the working classes. As a result, holding two to three jobs to make ends meet has become an increasingly widespread necessity; as has sales of body organs and blood as ways of making ends meet; as has prostitution. Social misery also registers itself in the number of addicts to hard drugs, such as heroin, crack cocaine and opium. As reported in The Guardian back in 2014, the interior minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, announced the number of those afflicted with drug addiction to be six million. Today, we most likely have close to seven to eight million addicts in a country of 80 million.

Poverty in Iran is suffered by almost half the population; the youth comprise half of the population, and youth unemployment is estimated at 40%; the numbers of homeless have

tripled in the past decade, and the homeless crisis has become so severe that some homeless people in Tehran have taken to sleeping in pre-dug graves in some cemeteries. The images of these grave-dwellers caused a huge outcry in Iran last year.

Iran is a society rich in resources and with incomes from oil, gas and petrochemical sales worth tens upon tens of billions of dollars in the past two years (since the nuclear deal was struck). The state has enough wealth to recruit, train, send and support a constant supply of mercenaries serving in foreign lands dying in thousands, killing in tens of thousands for the past six years, just so a dictator and his family can maintain absolute control over Syria; yet so little is done to help out the most desperate of the people in Iran.

The very “mostaz’afaan”, the wretched of the earth, the downtrodden, in regime’s own language, the very people regime’s ideologues claim to be the intended beneficiaries of the revolution — these wretched of the earth are the ones who just rose up to shout their hatred and disgust at the entire regime.

And that is the qualitative difference between this latest unrest and that of the 2009. The social contradictions that have sent Iranian people onto the streets on a regular basis, in different sizes, and initiated by different segments of the population, are deepening and finding a sharper class character.

Those hopeful that this monstrous theocracy suffocating our people is going to last forever may be catching their breaths right now, happy that the people’s upheaval was crushed.

But we have happy (for us) news for them. It was not crushed. I cannot be crushed. Not for long; in any given decade, or two or three, we have risen up again and again since 1905; all of those major upheavals were also marked by smaller upheavals and recurrent unrest dispersed in between. Those in charge claim fantasies of having crushed the ‘sedition’, but that’s just hopeful thinking made into statements that history shreds on a regular basis.

Since the Constitutional Revolution of more than a century ago in Iran (1905-1911), the people of Iran have not stopped attacking our equivalent of the French Bastille – our traditional ruling classes. For thousands of years, the traditional ruling classes in Iran, just like in Europe, had been a joint venture of what in Persian we call “Shah-o-Sheikh” (monarchy and clergy). Now the ruling class is comprised solely of the clergy and their assortment of security forces and paramilitary support systems. Their economic structure is, like the Shah’s regime, capitalist; only, this one is of the extremist neoliberal type with a theocratic superstructure: The worst of the worst kind of capitalism you can get forced into.

Those who consider themselves to be of the leftist tradition of the Enlightenment and the left wing of the French Revolution and supporters of the Russian Revolution, and at the same time support this medieval theocratic regime, must simply have left all reason and rationality behind.

The western left must take account of the fact that the Iranian regime is the victory of the counterrevolution in Iran in the wake of the revolutionary movement that swept the Shah and monarchy out of power in 1979.

Some in the western left, as well as the Reformist wing of the regime, claim that a revolutionary movement in Iran is something to be afraid of since it can only end Iran up like Iraq or Syria. This line of thinking does not take into account the fact that the Islamic Republic, just as much as the U.S. is responsible for spreading violence and instability across the greater Middle East, from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

This is not just State Department propaganda. This is the reality of the power status in the Middle East. The State Department would naturally have a say about this reality. But it is a reality. It is a reality experienced and hated by the Arab masses who are being slaughtered by Iranian-organized militias ravaging their communities; just as Vietnamese peasants and fighters hated the ravaging and violence brought onto their communities, villages, towns and cities by the U.S. forces.

If we look at the actual demands raised in the 1979 revolution in Iran, we realize that all those demands are still not realized and have repeatedly been brought to the streets: economic justice, freedom and independence from imperialist powers (including Russia and China). The same social conflicts and contradictions are still present, and have in fact intensified ten-fold under the suffocating social conditions this theocracy has imposed on society for almost forty years.

The social demands of the next revolutionary movement in Iran are not something that can be ignored by resorting to political-strategic calculations to do with power moves by outside players. The people of Iran have a natural right to demand what's justly their basic rights as humans, and they will fight for those rights regardless of what outside powers may or may not wish to do. Did the Cuban people in late 19th century give up their fight to gain independence from Spain just because the American government at the time got involved in that fight?

The latest protests in Iran were many things. They were 'street intelligence' throwing a wrench in the wheels of the ruling theocracy and challenging its neoliberalism at home

and its regional imperialism; a loud rejection of a sham ‘legitimacy’ being forced down people’s throats, a shout of people’s disgust transmitted to the world; it was a social oppositional awareness expressing itself spontaneously on a mass scale; and it was an exhibit of formerly repressed social grievances voiced out loud. Those who didn’t take to the streets in the last wave of protests back in 2009 have been thinking and dreaming about this moment. This time they came out, and they came out more articulately.

Many observers have contrasted this latest upheaval with the much more protracted Green Movement of the 2009, which lasted in effect for just over seven months. A significant factor in the shaping of the 2009 movement was that the movement found its initial impetus from challenging the results of the rigged June 2009 elections. So, its most vociferous demand was to challenge the official results of an election. This meant that, fundamentally, it was submitting to the legitimacy of one faction of the regime, the ‘Reformists’.

During these latest protests, however, the most prominent slogan was, “Bread, Jobs, Liberty!” while all other slogans pointed either to the looting of the national wealth by the clerical classes and their cronies, or else they focused on negating Iranian regime’s expansionist policies in the region. Here we can see a clear and unambiguous deepening of the publicly-mass-expressed awareness of the working classes confronting the whole regime.

Historically, people make their moves one step at a time, and as they can, but in the case of this latest step the Iranian people took, we can see a deepening of the demands they bring to the battle in each successive stage of their long struggle for achieving social justice for all. So, we can see the collective political subjectivity of the masses taking a significant and conscious step on the path to becoming a “class for itself”.

Iranians are no exception to the general rules of human social developmental laws that govern other nations. We have our own circumstances, our own historical rhythms, but we have the same universal problems as the rest of humanity. And as we go through our cycles of struggle against deep structural injustices woven into our economic and political structures, we learn and proceed forward. Any fundamental social transformation is the work of generations, not a one-time-event.

Consider this historical fact: the three pillars of the French Revolution’s (1789) main slogan were, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”. Liberty from an absolutist monarchy was achieved, of course. An actual legal end to the privileges of a monarchial type of governance, however, was not achieved until the Third Republic (1870); that’s 81 years.

Equality of genders in terms of political rights — voting rights — took until 1945 to be achieved; that is, 156 years for legal gender equality to become a reality in a country we consider ‘progressive’, First World, currently imperialist, formerly colonialist power with colonies across the globe, bringing them their special sauce of ‘mission civilisatrice’. And that’s just one aspect of equality. Eradication of classes has obviously not been achieved in France, and in fact class inequalities are deepening more than ever; so, no fraternity either. Iranian socialists rejoice in the people’s efforts to take the struggle one step further, giving the class conflict in Iran a sharper definition; we salute our people’s fighting spirit!