

Green Uprising in Iran

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The uprising in Iran was triggered by what was widely perceived as a coup—what was seen by many to be the theft of the presidential election on June 12 by the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from his main opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Within three hours of the closing of the polls, victory was declared for Ahmadinejad. Millions of those who had grown weary of the regime had been convinced to go out and vote yet one more time to "express their will" against the reactionary status quo and were shocked and outraged at the blatant manipulation.

This was too much. People began to flood into the streets in anger, and Mousavi refused to accept the result. By Friday, June 19, the head of Iran's government, Ayatollah Khamenei, forbade further demonstrations. On June 20 tens of thousands of people defied Khamenei and the government ban and fought police in the streets of the main city, Tehran.

The initial upsurge, early in the week, was met by counter-demonstrations of the loyal base of Ahmadinejad and violent attacks by the police and the Basij, a reactionary militia linked with the elite state armed forces units (the Pasdaran, or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp [IRGC]). In the first week after the election, the Iranian authorities had acknowledged eight deaths of protesters at the hands of the Basij, including as a result of machine gun fire opened up on a demonstration on June 15. The Basij have also ransacked dormitories and buildings at Tehran University and students activists have reported that an additional seven students have been killed in Tehran and in the southern city of Shiraz, beyond the eight officially acknowledged. Hundreds of protesters as well as activists and/or leaders of the main and other reform parties have been arrested. There have been an additional 10 deaths confirmed by Iranian state TV and unconfirmed reports of up to 150 in the clashes with police in the afternoon of June 20.

Both main leading forces in this conflict right now—Ahmadinejad and his forces, on the one hand, and the group around Mousavi on the other—are reactionary and do not represent the interests of the masses. And this goes double for the US and other imperialist powers which are attempting to maneuver within this.

But this conflict between two reactionary sections of the regime has also opened space for people to act and to raise their heads. The masses battling against the "Ahmadinejad coup" are waging a struggle that should be supported and has the potential—and necessity—to be transformed into a struggle between progressive, even revolutionary forces, and the forces of the old, reactionary order, in their various guises and manifestations. The stakes are very high.

These are the biggest demonstrations in Iran since the 1978-79 upsurge which toppled the previous regime, headed by the Shah of Iran. But the anger and determination expressed in these protests is not simply a reaction to the blatant tampering with election results. It also reflects profound and deep dissatisfaction in Iranian society with the theocratic (religious rule) regime. These sentiments

are especially strong among large sections of the youth of Iran who are extremely alienated—sick to death—of the absolutist rule of the "mullahs" (Shiite Islamic clerics). All this has been brought to the surface by, and intersects with, sharpening rivalry and deep schisms within the overall reactionary ruling circles of Iran.

Mousavi does not oppose the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). He is a "reform" candidate. And a reform candidate of the likes of Mousavi was not particularly new to the Iranian terrain. In fact another such reform candidate, Khatami, was elected as president in 1997 and was president until point of the reform movement was—and continues to be—reform of the Islamic Republic of Iran from "within." At least up to the present, this movement has remained loyal to the guiding institutions of the clerical regime (and indeed a number of the key players associated with this reform movement are themselves high ranking clerics). And objectively this reform movement plays an important role for the regime of "roping-in" the disaffected sections of masses. As a leaflet the Communist Party of Iran (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) [CPI(MLM)] released before the election put it, "These elections portray the rule of the minority [the ruling classes] as the choice of the majority of people. Even regimes such as the Islamic Republic of Iran that mainly rely on the suppression and repression of the people need electoral spectacles to legitimize their rule and spread illusion among the discontented people. Elections are also a mechanism to carry out controlled contention among different factions and gangs within the ruling classes to prevent cracks in the power structure and possible resulting storms of mass rebellion...."

Khatami came into office with the overwhelming support of the ruling circles in Iran, advocating economic reform, opening up on a whole new level to the world to attract capital, seeking to change many of Iran's international relations in the region and Europe, as well as domestic political reforms. While the early years of the Khatami presidency have been dubbed the "Tehran Spring," and included some loosening up on some issues of censorship and some further allowances and latitude in Iranian civil society, many of the attempts to implement these reforms were blocked by other core forces in the regime. In fact, a student movement that had emerged during this "springtime" was brutally suppressed, with Khatami neither willing nor able to stop this from happening. And despite the Iranian regime at that time initially assisting the US in stabilizing Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion, this cooperation by the Iranian government with the US imperialists was "rewarded" by singling out Iran as a member of "the axis of evil." Offers by Khatami of major concessions to the US were also summarily rebuffed by the Bush administration.

All this actually greatly strengthened the pole in the Iranian ruling class that coalesced around Ahmadinejad. Dubbed "the new generation of hardliners" by the western media, there are powerful circles among the clergy, segments of the state capitalist sector and the leadership of such institutions as the IRGC that are behind him, and the popular base of this section of the Iranian ruling circles includes the traditional conservative classes and also large significant sections of the military and IRGC, Basij members, managers, administrators, and employees

in Iran's political/military institutions which in many cases are also major financial institutions.

While there have been conflicts and differences within the Iranian ruling circles since the consolidation of the IRI, up till this point the regime has held together via its theocratic ideological glue and the institutions built up around this. This centralization though has gone along with a certain degree of different factions of the ruling class able to find a place to operate within the system. But these developments that brought about the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005 had to a large degree continued to further isolate the reformers, icing them out from the heart of power and actually severely alienating their base among the masses from the regime overall. This alienation was reflected, for example, in the extremely low voter turnouts in the 2005 presidential elections and as recently as the 2008 parliamentary elections.

These forces represented by the electoral reformers are by no means minor players or any type of friends of the people. While having real differences with the current core forces of the regime, and while currently isolated from the heart of power, they are as essentially reactionary as the "hardliners" represented by Ahmadinejad. The main representatives of this movement are not only loyal to the main institutions of the Islamic Republic, many of the key players in this movement were actually central to the initial emergence of the Islamic regime after the revolution against the Shah. Some directly oversaw the extremely brutal suppression of progressive and revolutionary forces in the 1980s, which included massive imprisonment, torture, exile and the outright executions of thousands of people. Mousavi himself was prime minister in this very period, from 1981-1989.

But opportunity for these reformers essentially came knocking with the election of Obama. To be clear, Obama has maintained the essential strategic course of the US ruling class in the Middle East, including many of Bush's specific policies. And no major section of the US bourgeoisie advocates a "live and let live" approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran. All these sections actually see Iran as a major problem for US interests especially in the Middle East, but the difference lies in how to transform the regime and this has been a source of significant disagreement in the US ruling class. While Obama shares the view that the IRI must be qualitatively transformed, he represents forces who agreed that the Bush tactics were not accomplishing those aims, and tactically he has made some shifts.

Obama's approach combines containment (military and diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and low-intensity warfare) with more flexible negotiations and various "soft power" initiatives (some economic overtures, cultural, etc.). He has also opened up the prospects of talks between the US and Iran and stated that there should be allowances for nuclear energy capabilities limited to peaceful purposes. But there is no indication that he has suspended the covert military operations of US Special Forces in Iran begun by Bush, and he has continued with the same exact assertion declared by the Bush regime (and Israel) that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and that such developments are unacceptable. Obama also emphasized that these talks cannot go on indefinitely and would need to come to a halt at about the end of the year. Such a statement implies moving from talking to something more draconian-from more effective

embargos to military measures-if the deadline is not met. This shift (the "carrot" and the implied "stick") in US policy in relation to Iran has likely contributed to the reformist forces within Iran gaining renewed political backbone and could very likely be even an element-in conjunction with the hatred for the current regime-of the rekindled support from broad sections of Iranian society for them.

But while the "reformer" forces were in part energized by Obama's new tactics, Obama himself has up to now played the current crisis close to his vest, offering only relatively tepid condemnations of the violence against the protesters. This is for several reasons. First, as Obama himself said early in the crisis, he does not necessarily think that Mousavi would dismantle the IRI, nor cease attempting to pursue things which have been forbidden by the US-including nuclear weapons. Second, also frankly admitted by Obama, because of the US history of domination of Iran, including its principal role in the installation and backing of the hated 25-year rule of the Shah from 1953 to 1978, there is every chance that any statement of support for the protesters by Obama would backfire. Right now, the US is "maneuvering, but holding their fire"-trying to figure out what course will overall most weaken the IRI and best enable the US to install a more pliant regime, and to carry out a more unfettered domination of the entire region. The fact that Khamenei in his Friday, June 19, speech aimed his main attack against Britain rather than the US has been interpreted by some to mean that the Khamenei/Ahmadinejad forces were signaling to the US that they were willing to make a deal if they made it through the crisis, and that it was in the US interests to work against Mousavi.

One factor that Obama is trying to play on is the lack of a clear understanding that imperialism is a system-not just a set of policies. Even as almost every section of Iranian society acknowledges and despises the US for its role in overthrowing Mossadegh in 1953 and installing and supporting the hated Shah-Obama's "admission" of a US "role" in that coup was very much an attempt to convince Iranian forces and masses of a new "kinder, gentler" US. These masses hate what America does on one level- but even many of the more progressive tend to reduce American hegemonism to a set of policies and do not understand it as the worldwide system that it is. This leaves them subject to the influence of the demagoguery of Obama.

This is part of what fed into the reported popular sentiment among the masses going into the election that they were not voting "for", Mousavi, but "against" Ahmadinejad. Such sentiments had also been fueled by the ruling class clique challenging the status quo, by broadcasts from western governments' spontaneous sentiments that saw potential for change through these means presented to them. An unprecedented televised debate between the two main candidates, Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, only days before the election added to this. Ahmadinejad went after Mousavi's past record as prime minister but largely focused on the corruption, graft, and private aggrandizement of Hashemi Rafsanjani (a major godfather type figure behind Mousavi) and defended his term as president based on the prestige of Iran with the non-aligned nations and accusing Mousavi of currying favor with "3 or 4 major powers." Mousavi attacked Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, censorship, economic record and Holocaust denial.

This debate apparently played a significant role in unleashing voters in relation to both candidates and the result was a huge voter turnout of 85%.

With the perceived theft of the election there was a convergence of several different factors. On the one hand, there was the shock and response from the actual significant ruling class forces represented by the likes of Mousavi and Rafsanjani and their base. On the other hand, this intersected with a broad-based mass movement that was desperate for change and fueled by hatred for all the IRI represents. These masses saw the election as the final straw.

Mousavi's loyalty to the Islamic regime is reflected by the promotion of green—the color used as a symbol of Islam—on banners, placards, and armbands of his supporters and calling for protesters to converge if they came under attack at the grave of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding cleric of the IRI. Mousavi represents the interests of the class forces that see pursuing their ambitions through the machinery of the Islamic Republic, and feel thwarted at the moment by Ahmadinejad. Like Ahmadinejad and Khamenei, they want to maintain exploitation of the masses, they want to maneuver within the relations of the imperialist world-system rather than rupture from it, and they want to maintain the chokehold of Islam as a way to control the masses and legitimize their own rule. They want to do this somewhat differently, with more of the trappings of bourgeois democracy, a loosening of the grip of the clerics, et al, and with a different economic policy.

There is the potential for revolutionary forces, even starting out small, to take advantage of the upsurge and strengthen the influence and organization for a revolutionary solution. If such forces are among the people in revolt, and if they struggle to change the terms of the revolt and divert it out of the channels of fighting just for a "reformed IRI," then a social struggle that at the beginning and spontaneously is confined essentially within the terms of opposition, between two poles which are both, fundamentally and ultimately, reactionary (e.g., bourgeois democracy vs. fundamentalist absolutism), provides both the necessity and the possibility to transform this into a dynamic in which there is a growing pole of radical opposition, breaking out of those confines and with a revolutionary communist force able to enter into and contend within the dynamic process and grow in strength through the course of this.

It is clear that this is the biggest internal challenge to the IRI since its consolidation in 1982. Which way it goes is up for grabs. The regime could undertake even more vicious repression, with widespread murder. The forces headed by Mousavi could well attempt to call things off. And there is no doubt whatsoever that the US and other powers will maneuver within this to keep the struggle of the masses within the confines of bourgeois-democratic terms and what is acceptable to imperialist interests.

On the other hand, it could also be the case that the conflict between these two reactionary forces continues to intensify. But even more important, there could also be the further development of this struggle along the lines outlined above—a struggle in which suppression against the masses does NOT succeed in "stuffing the genie back in the bottle"...a struggle full of twists and turns, outbreaks and seeming calms...a struggle in which the interests of the masses are brought to the fore through that whole complex process.

**It is this latter course which all who hunger for fundamental radical change—
for revolution—should not only fervently hope for, but politically support. □ [Source
: *Revolution, Chicago*]**