

Class Nature of the Iranian Regime¹

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The current Iranian regime which has been in power in the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 revolution against the Shah, continues to confuse many observers as to its true nature. The intrinsic confusion lies precisely in the fact that it is indeed a post-revolutionary regime. The usual common sense of the "stagists", from which we suffer a great deal within the anti-imperialist left, leads them to make the great discovery that anything post Shah must be a step in the right direction. This is as if there is no going back in human history. It is as if we have not seen, time and time again, that if a revolution does not go all the way it may get kicked back to a darker past.

So unfortunately even after almost 30 years of its brutal rule, we are still constantly confronted with the argument that whatever the character of the Iranian regime, and however oppressive and abhorrent it may be, it nevertheless is one which came out of a revolution against the Shah's dictatorship, a dictatorship which had transformed Iran into a colony of US imperialism in all but name.² Somehow, this "logic" is then used to bestow a certain air of progressiveness upon a regime which for any observer with a little political sense is nothing but a semi-fascistic theocracy defending an even more backward and cynical capitalism than the one it replaced. Since 1979, its apologists have constantly resorted to such simplistic devices to gloss over the brutal character of this backward capitalist dictatorship.³

After 1979 the Iranian left was torn apart as the pro-Soviet Stalinist *Tudeh* Party and its allies amongst the *Fedayin Majority*, as well as sections of the Trotskyite Fourth International, used precisely the same arguments to justify their collaboration with this

1 Published in Critique 43, Vol. 35, No. 3, December 2007.

2 Six Key Facts about the Iranian Revolution http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=685

3 Note from the Editors - Monthly Review- <http://www.monthlyreview.org/nfte0406.htm>
accessed 20th August 2007

"post-revolutionary" and "anti-imperialist" regime, especially after it occupied the US embassy in Tehran and took American hostages. They ended up actively justifying and even helping it in the suppression and mass execution of its leftist opponents, before it predictably turned on them. Today with the threat of another US led military invasion hanging over the Middle East, "post Stalinist" supporters of the regime outside Iran are once again calling us to defend the anti-imperialist gains of the Iranian Revolution embodied in Ayatollah Khamenehii's *hezbollah*. Then we were told the only real choice was between the pro-US Shah or the anti-West Khomeyni; today we are offered no better - Bush or Ahmadinezhad. After almost 30 years of repression at its hands we still have Marxists "scholars" in the West who take the anti-US rhetoric of this regime at face value, and insist that it must be defended against US imperialism at all costs⁴.

What all the apologists fail to mention is the fact that yes, this regime did indeed come out of a revolution, but as the *counter-revolution* that had defeated that revolution. This is a regime at whose helm is a coalition of bourgeois forces which crushed the mass movement of the oppressed against the Shah's regime by establishing a "new" capitalist order even more reactionary and dictatorial than what it replaced. The very same force which is now, in front of the whole world, collaborating in the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq with the very same President Bush who is trying his best to send the entire Iranian society back to the middle ages. Under the pretext of the threat of war, inside Iran workers protests are suppressed and their supporters being accused of collaborating with a planned "velvet revolution", whilst outside Iran we are told by our apologists not to criticise the Iranian regime as it is the only real force standing up to US imperialism.⁵

Counter-revolution

Let us re-emphasise that any analysis of the Iranian regime must obviously start with the fact that this so-called post-revolutionary regime was simply a kind of counter-revolution that got rid of both the Shah and the revolution.⁶ It is now a well documented

4 Alex Callinicos in Marxism 2007: "Iran is the most democratic state in the Middle East"

5 Yassamine Mather, Clear distance - <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/685/iran.htm>

6 For an assessment of the Iranian revolution see: Torab Saleth, "Revolution and Counter Revolution in Iran", 1982, Paris, <http://www.hopoi.org/iran-revolution.html>

fact that by the middle of 1979, at the top levels of International and Iranian bourgeois circles, the powers that mattered had already reached a simple compromise and began to implement a change of regime from above. The compromise was simply this: you (Khomeini) get rid of the revolution, we (USA) will get rid of the Shah! As President Carter's memoirs show, the only bone of contention was the degree of direct intervention by the mullahs in the new government. Precisely the same problem faces US negotiators in Iraq over the nature of the new Iraqi government and the degree of direct control by the mullahs. President Carter claims he was duped by the mullahs, but frankly he had no choice, as his replacement today has no choice in Iraq either.⁷ A so-called "democratic" Islamic form was what was agreed then and what is now being put in place in Iraq. This was then the only compromise which could have saved the bourgeois state from total destruction as it is today. Thus, the so-called modernist, industrialist, pro-Western bourgeois faction around the Shah was forced to hand power to a more Islamic traditionalist, mercantilist faction under the leadership of the Shiite hierarchy. But as the Iranian saying goes, and as Carter discovered later, you never get any thing back from a *mullah*.

Let us also not forget, given the degree of participation by the masses, the Iranian Revolution of 1977-79 was one of the most important revolutions of the 20th century. During the four months leading to the insurrection in February 1979 there was a general strike involving over 4 million workers. Strike committees had sprung up everywhere and neighbourhood committees were controlling most urban areas. On the night of the insurrection in Tehran alone it was estimated that more than 300,000 guns were ransacked from various military arsenals and distributed amongst the population. No wonder the counter revolution which defeated it was also one of the most vicious counter revolutions seen in recent history. The last Shah was justly called "the butcher of the Middle East". In almost 40 years of his rule around 500 political prisoners were executed. The new regime, in its first 10 years alone, and at the most conservative estimate, had already executed well over 20,000 political prisoners, all leaders and activists of the 1979 revolution.

The historical results of this counter revolution are also obvious for all to see. If during the last decade of the Shah's rule a group of around 100 families used state power to monopolize the entire Iranian economy, this has now been reduced to less than 60

⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*. Bantam Books, NY 1982.

families. If the Shah at least allowed some degree of docile yellow unionism to operate in his kingdom, this regime cannot tolerate any worker representation even in an International Labour Organisation sponsored 3-partite system of managers, workers and the state. Only Islamic Associations controlled by the local mosque or the local Islamic paramilitary group are allowed; and even these only in so far as they operate as appendages of the repressive arm of the state.

The majority of the population in Iran is now officially under the poverty line. This is a country rich in natural resources, which has almost quadrupled its foreign exchange receipts over the last 10 years. With over 10 million unemployed, wages have been pushed so far back that those who do find work have to do more than one job just to survive. Selling kidneys or the whole body is now the largest source of income for the urban poor. Right now, there are tens of thousands of workers whose wages have not been paid for well over a year. There is absolutely no protection under the law for almost 85% of the work force employed in small workshops. The rate of suicide among the Iranian working class is now higher than Britain during the industrial revolution. Even a simple list of all the atrocities committed by this "new Islamic order" will take up volumes⁸.

As for its anti-imperialism, suffice it to say that the father of the current US President knows this to be a sham better than any one else. During the presidency of Reagan, the Islamic regime had absolutely no qualms in negotiating a deal with US imperialism and Israel via George Bush senior.⁹ Forget the anti-terrorist rhetoric repeated daily on the international media: every one knows that without Iranian backing, the USA could not have invaded Afghanistan or Iraq or stayed there until now. The very same Pasdarans who the US administration is now branding as terrorists sat around the table with US representatives negotiating Iranian backing for the Iraqi invasion. George Bush can blame Iran for his failure in Iraq, whilst the Iranian regime can blame the USA for its own failure in Iran. Just look at how the nuclear crisis has helped the Iranian regime to redeem itself in the Islamic world after its collaboration with US

8 Parviz Raeis Dana interview with Radio Barabari (July 2007)
<http://www.radiobarabri.com> accessed 24th August 2007

9 The Iran Contra affair -
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/index.htm> accessed 29th August 2007

imperialism in the occupation of two neighbouring countries. And US Imperialism in not only justifying its military occupation of the whole region but even increasing its presence and intensifying its threat. And, of course, selling lucrative arm contracts around the region.

The History of Counter-revolution

But even these hard facts do not resolve the difficulty for the regime's apologists. This is because the peculiar feature of the Iranian revolution is that this very same counter-revolutionary force actually participated in the revolutionary movement itself. In a way you could even say it took over the leadership of that revolution. Similarly the same forces in the Middle East are now claiming the leadership of the anti-Zionist movement. But how can this be? Why should a counter-revolution lead a revolution that it must later crush?

There is of course the obvious answer that in order to control the mass movement they had to lead it; and there is more than an element of truth in this. By channelling the mass anger against US imperialism and the new capitalist ruling class around the Shah into the backward blind alley of an anti-Western and anti-infidel ideology, their own true reactionary class nature was well hidden from the masses. But the true reasons for this apparent contradiction lies at the specific character of the Iranian ruling class and the changes it underwent after the Shah's White Revolution.

It can be said that the revolts of the urban poor in 1976 and their many clashes with the military forces were the first signs of the onset of the revolutionary crisis in Iran. The fundamental feature of the Iranian revolution which makes it distinct from any other is the fact that less than a year after these first signs, say as early as 1977, in contradistinction to the progressive revolutionary mass movement of workers, poor peasants, shanty town dwellers, students, young women, and major sections of the national minorities, all of whom were demanding justice, freedom and independence in various combinations and degrees, there also appeared an other "Islamic" mass movement, well organised and led by a faction within the Shi'ite hierarchy in coalition with a powerful group of the bazaar merchants. This bloc consisted of a loose coalition of various religious bourgeois political currents ranging from liberal Islamists to fundamentalists. It had mass support within the traditional sections of the numerically

significant urban and rural petty bourgeoisie and through its various religious networks and charity foundations which were linked to the local mosque it could also mobilize support amongst the poor and the lumpen proletariat.

Soon this second force proved to be more powerful than the revolutionary masses. The masses were unorganized and without any leadership, whilst this holy alliance was well organized and had lots of cash. It was also uncompromising towards the Shah's regime. Its historical chance to regain its lost position within the state had come and it was not about to settle for any compromise. This gave it an air of radicalism in the eyes of the masses. The mullahs of course nurtured this image further with the promise of heaven on earth. The oil money was to be justly shared, gas and electricity were to be free for the poor, shanty towns were to be demolished and replaced with cheap housing for all, and unemployment was to be made a thing of the past. And of course mullahs are well seasoned experts at such demagogic. And to top it all, every shade of Iranian Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism praised this leadership to high heavens. It soon took over the leadership of the mass movement.

Indeed, if this leadership could have had its own way, there would not have been an insurrection at all. It had already set up a secret Council of the Islamic Revolution which had successfully negotiated a transition of power from above with both the US masters of the Shah and His own Majesty's Royal Army and Security Forces. Many active members of this group who had been in Shah's jails had already been released a year before the insurrection. The insurrection took place only because the commanders of the Royal Guard did not abide by this agreement and marched with their units on to Tehran to crush the "mutinous" Air Force Barracks in the capital. In reaction to this attack, the air force technicians opened the arsenals to the population which led to an armed insurrection a few hours later. Well into the insurrection itself, supporters of Khomeini were still standing on every crossroad in Tehran with a placard saying: go home, "Imam has not yet ordered an insurrection"! The revolutionary masses out on the streets had by the early hours of the next morning stormed every police station and known Savak location in Tehran. The same masses would, however, only a few hours later hand over the arrested Savak agents and other enforcers of the Shah's rule to the local mosque.

The bloc which took power the next morning not only saved the bourgeois state from almost certain destruction, but it also hugely strengthened the reactionary forces by

adding to them a multitude of new and permanently mobilised paramilitary groups such as the Guardian Army of the Islamic Revolution (*Pasdaran*) or the Mobilisation Corps (*basij*). It soon disarmed and crushed the revolutionary mass movement and decimated all the political groups which opposed its rule. At first it collaborated with the liberal sections of the bourgeois opposition to the Shah, but as soon as it had consolidated its own power base it pushed all other factions out of positions of power and openly established a theocratic Islamic regime. This is what president Carter meant when he claimed he was duped by the mullahs. This same bloc still rules Iran.

History of Conflict between Clergy and Shah

The reactionary content of this opposition to the Shah becomes clear when we briefly look back into the history of the conflict between clergy and Shah. Let us start with the clergy. Historically, the Shi'ite hierarchy was a well-established part of the traditional despotic state in Iran's Asiatic mode of production. Its foundation was laid by the Safavids (1501-1722) who declared Shi'ite Islam to be the official religion of the empire. This clerical institution did not collapse with the break up of the *Safavid* dynasty, and despite many changes it has lasted to this day. Amongst other things, it traditionally controlled most of the education system and the judiciary. It had its own extensive land holdings and even its own source of taxation which was enforced by armed gangs of tax collectors who got their orders from various chief mullahs.

Thus the clergy was well organized and active during the entire period of the break up of the Asiatic mode of production and the gradual transition towards capitalism. The hierarchy flourished and became even more powerful especially at times when the central government was weak. There are numerous occasions in Iranian history when the religious hierarchy acted and behaved like "a state within a state". In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a powerful faction within the clerical hierarchy began to openly engage in politics to oppose bourgeois reforms of the state. These people were the ideological forebears of Khomeini. Amongst them were some of the most reactionary mullahs of the period. Some were openly associated with both Russian and British imperialism. Don't forget that British imperialism so valued the reactionary role of such mullahs that it even established a school in Delhi, both to train them and export them throughout the region.

This fundamentalist faction agitated against Mozaffaredin Shah (1853-1907) and vehemently opposed Iran's "bourgeois democratic" Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906. Their famous slogan was: "No to Constitutional Legitimacy! Yes to Islamic Legitimacy!" They opposed the revolution from a reactionary standpoint, just as they did in 1979. They opposed the ruling reaction because they were part of the old order which was being threatened with replacement by a new, more secular, or more bourgeois-looking order. The Shi'ite hierarchy broke up into factions just as the catholic church in the 15th and 16th century had broken up into factions which either opposed or aligned themselves with the new rising capitalist order. Some mullahs supported constitutional reforms but the fundamentalists wanted even more Islamic rule. Typically, British imperialism had agents in both camps¹⁰.

Thus, the ideological forbears of Khomeini were against the whole concept of citizenship and the right to vote. They considered democracy to be a Western conspiracy which was designed by infidels to destroy Islam. Although after the initial victory of the Constitutional Revolution, the leaders of this faction were hanged in front of the new parliament, the defeat of the revolution a few years later once again strengthened the more backward-looking faction of the clergy at the expense of the constitutionalists. The immediate historical consequence of the defeat of the revolution was a secret deal between Russian imperialism and British imperialism to divide Iran into exclusive spheres of influence in the North and South, with the centre as a neutral zone¹¹. After the Russian revolution of 1917, British imperialism's interests were better served by a centralized nation state in Iran built from above which could stand up against the threat of Bolshevik influence. The establishment of Reza Shah and his state reforms brought the fundamentalist faction into direct conflict with the state. The fact that Reza Shah's son was so openly put in power and backed by the West gave this reactionary faction a new lease of political life. It was much helped also by the fact that the progressive faction within the Shi'ite hierarchy had by now either disappeared completely or that its remnants had been totally tainted as part of the new "Western"

¹⁰ In opposition to those mullahs which were backed and financed by the Russians and were at the forefront of the opposition to the Constitutional Revolution, the British backed an even more fundamentalist group which opposed not only the revolution but also the Russians. The links of the British with the bazaar merchants meant, however, that they also had to have a pro-British faction within the constitutionalist mullahs.

¹¹ These secret treaties were only made public after the October Revolution of 1917.

state. This period gave the fundamentalists enough muscle to start threatening the leadership of the entire hierarchy.

The last blow for this faithful institute of the Asiatic mode of production was the former Shah's so-called "White Revolution" during the 1960s. This further undermined the role and prestige of the clergy in Iranian society. The reactionary faction became so vocal that the leadership of the entire Shi'ite hierarchy had to give it lip service. Thus the clergy as a whole came out in opposition to the reforms. Among other things, they opposed the Shah's land reforms, as they were themselves one of the biggest land owners in Iran; they opposed the local government reforms, as this would have seriously undermined their local power base in the provinces; and they were against giving the vote to women because it would undermine their very ideological authority. The revolt of 1963 was led by Khomeini. He was already a well known figure in Islamic circles, even before the CIA coup of 1953 which overthrew Mossadegh's nationalist government and brought back the Shah. Khomeini was already associated with militant Islamic groups who opposed "Western infidels" and he had already published his now famous pamphlet on the need for an Islamic Government. But because the whole Shi'ite hierarchy had betrayed Mosaddegh and supported the CIA coup, the fundamentalists were shamed into silence and retreated into the background. The White Revolution gave them a chance to return to politics and swing the whole hierarchy in favour of their own position.

The big bazaar merchants were the second part of the bloc which took power in 1979. They had also been part of the ruling class for well over a century. At the time of the Shah's White Revolution they had a complete stranglehold on the Iranian economy. And do not think for a minute that they somehow represented the Iranian version of the so-called "national" bourgeoisie. They were completely comprador. Traditionally they had very close ties with the Shi'ite hierarchy. They actively supported the 1953 coup which defeated the mass movement for oil nationalization. This layer had traditionally enjoyed a monopolistic position within the Iranian economy which it gained by collaborating with British Imperialism on the one hand, whilst on the other hand using Islamic crowd thugs to destroy competition from indigenous manufacturers. This layer was so economically powerful, with a socially well-developed network throughout Iran, that it was actually the main objective obstacle to capitalist development. The entire economic life of this layer was threatened by the Shah's proposed reforms.

At the core of the Shah's "revolution" was an attempt to introduce a limited industrialisation which was based on the import of capital goods and the production of consumer goods for the home market under license from foreign companies. This plan directly clashed with the interests of the big bazaar merchants. Well before the White Revolution the government had shown its intention by introducing import tariffs on most consumer goods.. The new group of "industrial" capitalists which grew around the royal court gradually pushed the traditional bazaris out of the ruling class and established their own hegemony over the Iranian economy. Although the bazaar merchants still had enormous wealth and capital, they had been turned into second-class citizens within their "own" bourgeois state. They thus became the bankers for the reactionary faction inside the Shi'ite hierarchy.

So in 1963 this holy alliance of fundamentalists and bazaris mobilised their supporters against the Shah's reforms. The movement was crushed by the Shah and its leaders (including Khomeini) were either arrested or forced into exile. It was in fact Khomeini's arrest which triggered the mass protests. In a fiery speech he had declared that the "evil intention" behind the White Revolution was to hand over Iran to " Jews, Christians, and the enemies of Islam".¹² He denounced the Shah as an "infidel Jew".

When in 1976 the first signs of the structural crisis of post-White Revolution Iranian capitalism became apparent, this coalition once again moved into action. Their hour had come. After all, they had warned against the White Revolution . The type of industrialization based on imported technology which was promoted by the Shah's regime had soon reached the limits of the national market and had become completely monopolistic. In the same way that the Moghul kings used to make gifts of whole provinces to their faithful servants, the Shah was granting monopolistic licenses to his cronies to produce consumer goods. The rampant corruption and the very high infrastructural costs had meant that goods thus produced could only be sold internally and even then under monopolistic powers. The peasant population released from ties to the land after the land reform was thus finding it increasingly difficult to find jobs in the new economy. The speed with which the small producers were being torn from their means of production was much faster than their rate of absorption into the new

12 Algar, Hamid (transl., ed): *Islam and Revolution : Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press. 1981).

labour force. Huge shanty towns had begun to grow around every major town and an ever widening gap had developed between the rich and the poor.

In the absence of any other organised opposition during the Shah's dictatorship and in a situation in which both the bourgeois nationalist currents under the National Front umbrella and the pro-Soviet left led by the Tudeh Party had already proven their bankruptcy earlier in the 50s, the Shiite hierarchy, with its huge network of mosques and well financed by the bazaar merchants, and with its own rent-a-mob mass base inside the shanty towns, rural areas and the traditional bazaar, soon took over the leadership of the protest movement against the Shah and imposed its own slogans and aspirations as the legitimate demands of the popular revolution itself. And the tragedy of the Iranian revolution is that the masses often willingly subordinated themselves to this leadership.

Conclusion: Permanent Crisis or Revolutionary Overthrow

How aptly Marx warned against the demagogic of the reactionary feudal socialists. Just substitute the word "Christianity" for "Islam": "Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity proclaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church?"¹³. Of such types of liberation theology we had plenty during the Shah's period. What is interesting is that today, in "Islamic" Iran, even this kind of talk can cost lives. When it was all for the overthrow of the Shah the clergy not only condoned this "radicalism" but even claimed the copyright to it. But now that it has to defend neoliberalism and the bourgeois state it has declared it to be heretical.

The capitalist class, both nationally and internationally, immediately recognized and has since supported, this counter-revolution, insofar as it had no other alternative for saving the bourgeois state. All the international institutions currently peddling the plans for the latest imperialist military adventure under the cover of "democracy for Middle East", had never lifted a finger when this same regime was massacring the revolutionaries and suppressing the working class for well over 20 years. Even if sections of the left still have problems in recognising the capitalist character of this

13 The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Frederik Engels

regime, the capitalists themselves have shown no doubt about its credentials. It takes one to know one. The huge international contracts struck by this regime have been well documented. But this is in no way a "normal" capitalist regime.

In a normal capitalist regime, one would probably expect two capitalists with equal amounts of capital to get the same average rate of return. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, one may lose his head whilst the other gets 10 times the average without even risking any capital of his own! In the long run, this regime has to change itself in accordance with the needs of the bourgeois state it is protecting. In a way the clerical regime has indeed changed itself over the years and it is now openly trying to prove to the US administration that it is prepared for a deal as long as the question of a "regime change" is no longer on the agenda. It may appear paradoxical that probably one of the countries in which the current privatization drive championed by the US neo-cons across the globe has been most enthusiastically applied is indeed Iran under the Islamic regime¹⁴.

The mafia-like cliques which have divided the national kitty among themselves and are overseeing this huge capitalist offensive are also clinging to power at all costs. Indeed, it has been proven once again that you never get anything back from a mullah. The Shi'ite hierarchy is not like Pinochet's junta which may one day realize it has passed its sell-by date and has to hand over to a more "normal" form of bourgeois rule. We have already seen three waves of reforms from within the regime itself which have all ended up with the reformers getting a slap in the face.

Naturally, the logic of all political reforms of the state in Iran will inevitably call for the withdrawal of the mullahs from positions of political power. As soon as this logic becomes clear in any real movement for reform, a new backlash is organized by the conservatives. Indeed, right now, we are going through such a phase in Iran. It has rightly been argued that the election of Ahmadinezhad as the new President was more a stick with which to beat the internal reformers than a challenge to the USA. There is such a tight match between the latest threats from Bush and the latest wave of suppression of all opposition inside Iran that you could well imagine that they are going over the plans together over the phone.

14 Anti-imperialism and Tehran <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/681/fringe%20iran.htm> accessed 29th August 2007

As this policy of relying on a situation of permanent crisis to hang on to power gets repeated ad infinitum, the perceived necessity for its revolutionary overthrow is also becoming more apparent. As the storms of a new revolution gather strength, Khamenei and Bush both hope the "nuclear crisis" can provide them with the cover for plunging the entire Iranian society into a state of permanent military curfew. Such situations, however, do also raise the prospect of a civil war. Whilst we must actively oppose Bush junior's latest military adventure and expose its intentions, we must not forget for a minute that the only way the Iranian masses can defend themselves is by overthrowing what Bush senior helped put in power to suppress them in the first place.