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## IRAN: POPULAR DISCONTENT RISES TO THE SURFACE

### Why this letter?

On 12 June 2009 the announcement of the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the outgoing president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was followed by a wave of riots and demonstrations contesting not only the result of the vote but also the legitimacy of those in power. Despite the ever-tightening police net, millions of Iranians took to the streets of Tehran, Tabriz, Mashad, Shiraz and other big cities, courageously defying the violence of the fascist militias directed by the state. These events plunged the Iranian theocracy into its most serious political crisis since the Iran-Iraq war (1980 to 1988) and revealed the existence of growing cracks within the ruling groups of the country. They also constituted the highest point reached so far of popular contestation of the regime. To dismiss the movement simply as a consequence of electoralism, or as a power struggle between various political tendencies within the Islamic Republic, would be a serious error.

This political crisis has an economic basis in common with that of other countries surviving on raw materials, in particular those based on oil rent. This is the incapacity of the ruling class to accumulate capital, in the zone where it holds power, to the level of development of the world market. But on this rentier base, Iran does have some unique traits. On one side, there is the failed attempt at an autarchic development of capital in Iran, from 1979 to 1994, leaving the productive apparatus fallow. On the other, there is the direct or indirect redistribution of oil revenues to the population, in order to assure the social compromise at all costs, which becomes more difficult as economic policy conforms more to the needs of accumulation. It is this which is the foundation of the political divergences between the various fractions of the ruling class which try to profit from the popular uprisings as well as those trying to preserve their positions.

Faced with this situation, where the ruling class hesitates between blocking everything and rushing ahead, it only maintains itself thanks to the lead blanket of permanent control. This is only possible with the support of a social base, which is still numerous. It is wonderful that the population has, albeit in an interclassist movement, thrown off this lead blanket and announced in the face of the world that something has begun in Iran, something which could have a major importance for the world working class.

### The principal events of the movement

- Beginning of June. For the first time in its history the Islamic Republic allowed televised debates between the candidates for the presidential election. The debate on 3 June, between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the reform candidate, Mir-Hossein Moussavi (a former Prime Minister, retired from the political scene since 1989), made Moussavi known to the general public.
- In the weeks before the elections, the campaign rallies of Moussavi attracted an unexpected level of participation. In Tehran and elsewhere, these new supporters didn't hesitate to parade in large numbers and to taunt the Ahmadinejad militants, present in much smaller numbers. They took over the streets until 4 in the morning and shouted slogans like "*Ahmadi bye bye*". It was like a festival with many convinced that the defeat of the president would follow. The state allowed these joyful public demonstrations, though they would normally be considered dangerous for the established order.

- The elections took place on Friday 12 June. The state cut mobile phone communication, jammed the BBC's Persian channel and blocked access to some internet sites, notably *Facebook*. The rate of participation reached at least 85%<sup>1</sup>. In numerous polling stations the close of voting was brought forward by several hours. In other places, the *Basij* militia confiscated the ballot boxes on the pretext of ensuring the count and avoiding irregularities. Almost two hours after the official close of voting, before the counting of votes had finished, Press TV (a press agency financed by the state) announced the victory of Ahmadinejad with a score of 69%.
- Saturday 13: in the morning the minister of the interior confirmed the victory of Ahmadinejad. A bit later, the Supreme Guide, Ali Khamenei, declared that the election was "*fair*" and congratulated the winning candidate on his victory. The state began to arrest people, whether they were members of various opposition tendencies or whether they were simply considered as dissidents. In the street, the police began to disperse the spontaneous gatherings which regrouped thousands of people in Tehran. Confrontations began, stones against truncheons. At least one person was killed by the police in *Vanak Square*. As night fell, buses and cars were set on fire, windows were smashed.
- Sunday 14: The riots continued in Tehran and extended to other major cities. Massive gatherings in at least three universities (out of 19) in Tehran transformed themselves into demonstrations. Ahmadinejad held a victory rally in *Valiasr Square* in Tehran "*but an odour of tear gas and smoke wafted over the enthusiastic crowd. Barely a few blocks away, groups of demonstrators chanted their own slogans against the government, and you could see some of them, bloodied and screaming, being chased by police officers armed with truncheons*"<sup>2</sup>. Moussavi, the principal opposition candidate, wrote a letter to the Council of Guardians of the Revolution complaining about irregularities in the election process. He also encouraged his supporters to stay calm and not to give way to violence. He called for a silent demonstration on the next day.
- On the night of 14 to 15, the police and the *Basij* organised a raid on the student halls of residence of the University of Tehran. The opposition suffered 5 deaths and many serious injuries. Other raids were organised against university student lodgings, in Tehran and Shiraz, causing at least 7 deaths in the days that followed.
- Monday 15: Despite the repression and the banning of the demonstration called by Moussavi, hundreds of thousands of people in Tehran (as millions demonstrated across the whole country) marched from *Enghelab* (Revolution) Square to that of *Azadi* (Freedom). At the end of the demonstration, a procession went off on its own towards the *Basij* barracks and was fired on by the militia. There were at least 7 deaths. Khamenei, the Supreme Guide, seemed to take a step back and announced the holding of an enquiry by the Council of Guardians into the allegations of vote manipulation.
- During the following days there were other demonstrations, but the number of participants declined, probably because of repression. The riots seemed to calm down, but the confrontations against the police and the *Basij* carried on outside the demonstrations. In eye-witness accounts and videos filmed by the participants, we can see that the demonstrators succeeded for the moment in gaining the upper hand and pushed back the cops and the *Basij* and burned their vehicles. On Tuesday 16, a counter-demonstration was called in support of the state and Ahmadinejad gathered fewer than 10,000 participants, who shouted "*the rioters must be executed*".
- Friday 19: under threats from the *Pasdaran*, the leaders of the opposition called on people not to demonstrate. Khamenei clearly stated that the government would not go back on the election results during his talk at Friday prayers in Tehran. He threatened everybody who instigated or participated in illegal demonstrations. However, he condemned the violent provocations of members of the *Basij*, and told them to calm down and "*reflect on the consequences of their actions*". Taking account of this speech, Moussavi called on people to no longer participate in unauthorised demonstrations, in particular the one called for the next day.
- Starting on Saturday 20, the repression intensified. The demonstrations were not only banned, but also prevented by massive groupings of *Basij* members and police at the places where they started. The *Basij* members in particular spread terror, following the participants to attack them outside the demonstrations or arbitrarily beating up passers by. From Monday 22, the *Pasdaran* threatened the demonstrators with a "*revolutionary confrontation with the Guardians, the Basij and the other security forces*".

<sup>1</sup> By comparison, when Ahmadinejad was elected the first time in 2005, almost half the electors abstained.

<sup>2</sup> *Unrest Deepens as Critics Are Detained*, New York Times website, 14 June 2009.

- On Saturday, when thousands of people demonstrated in Tehran, at least a dozen people were killed, and hundreds injured. The suffering of one of them, Neda Soltan, hit by a bullet outside a demonstration, was filmed by several people and rapidly spread over the internet on sites like *Facebook* and *YouTube*.
- In the following week the gatherings continued – many thousands of people on the 22<sup>nd</sup> in Tehran, and many hundreds in front of parliament on 24<sup>th</sup>. They were invariably prevented and often turned into a confrontation between the forces of repression and groups of up to several hundred demonstrators who tried to get to the meeting points.
  - On 28 June, an authorised rally called by Moussavi in front of the Ghoba mosque for the commemoration of Mohammad Beheshti, one of the founders of the regime and the victim of an assassination in 1981, served as the pretext for a demonstration. The police dispersed it violently.
  - Thursday 9 July: On the occasion of the commemoration of the victims of the student movement of 1999 there were new confrontations in the capital. Around *Enghelab* Square and the University of Tehran, thousands of young people divided into groups of several hundred confronted the forces of order.
  - Friday 17 July: After two months it was the turn of Rafsanjani (who'd supported Moussavi's candidature) to lead the Friday prayers, at the University of Tehran. On this occasion, Moussavi made his first public appearance since the days following the elections. Tens of thousands gathered around the university to hear the sermon, also transmitted live on radio. Rafsanjani demanded the freeing of people arrested during the post-electoral crisis and the lifting of restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of expression. He also supported the legitimacy of the doubts "*of a great number of Iranians*" about the election results. Outside the university the police intervened to disperse the crowd shouting slogans against the government.
  - On 30 July, thousands of people gathered on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> day of mourning for Neda Agha-Soltan. The police prevented Moussavi from entering the cemetery of *Behesht-e-Zahra*, where the young woman was buried, while the demonstrators chanted "*Neda lives, it is Ahmadinejad who is dead*".

On the basis of this short and necessarily partial chronology we can identify five different phases of this movement.

The first, during the electoral campaign, between the televised Ahmadinejad-Moussavi debate and the day of the election. At that point the candidate Moussavi succeeded in putting himself forward as a focus for most of the opponents of Ahmadinejad, whatever the origin of their grievances. These were economic for the liberal part of the clergy and the business men of the *Bazaar*, political for those sectors of the dominant classes marginalised by the rise to power of the *Pasdaran*, and finally, democratic, as is the case in interclassist movements which extol the virtues of more political democracy and individual freedom. A wind of hope blew through the whole of civil society, in particular for those too young to have been disappointed by the defeat of the two previous attempts at reform via the ballot box, the election of Mohamad Khatami to the presidency in 1997 and 2001.

The second, after the election day, when we could see, over two days, the first explosions of anger, often spontaneous. The sub-soil of Iranian civil society, notably that of the big cities and the traditional places of contestation like the universities, began to rise again. On their side, the militia men of the *Basij*, being unable to respond to the continuing provocations of the "Green" opposition during the electoral campaign, could finally take their revenge *manu militari*.

The third opened with the first mass demonstration called by Moussavi. These demonstrations continued for several days and all sections of Iranian society were gathered there, still in an unintended manner. Even though repression never ceased and sometimes deadly confrontations took place around these demonstrations, the state pretended to pull back so as to gain time. It was a question of organising repression, while restoring *Basij* control. The talk by the Supreme Guide during Friday prayers gave an ideological justification for the repression.

The fourth began the next day when the repression moved up a notch. Moussavi, who had even previously declared himself unafraid to become a martyr<sup>3</sup>, dissociated himself from the illegal movement. The green wave faded and the demonstrations returned to the form they had in the first two days: spontaneity, very violent confrontations, involving minority groups of demonstrators, composed above all of urban youth.

<sup>3</sup> "*I am washed and ready for martyrdom!*", cried the reform candidate' – *Libération*, 20 June 2009.

Finally the fifth, at the end of a week marked by the impossibility of gathering, whether it was to mourn the victims of repression or even during an authorised rally called by Moussavi (who didn't show up), when the movement seemed to fade away. Nevertheless, the embers were still hot as was shown by the demonstrations of 9, 17 and 30 July.

After a few agitated weeks the Iranian state seemed to have gained the upper hand. Nevertheless, the immense apparatus of repression that was mobilised had not succeeded for the moment in entirely snuffing out the centres of the revolt, despite mass arrests, violence and terror. The struggle revealed and intensified the divergences between the leading factions of the Shiite theocracy and between factions of the ruling class in general, opening up a fault line between two well defined camps, subject in their turn to internal divisions. Finally, by the very fact of the state's manipulation of the election results, the movement made it clear that the democratic process in Iran is nothing other than a vast masquerade, leaving no other option but insurrection to all those who refuse to accept the political vision of the *Pasdaran*, even if they just want to achieve the simple objectives proper to modern political democracy.

## Some economic and historical key facts to help the reader

### *In the beginning*

The economic history of Iran possesses traits common to many precapitalist formations: a development which never went beyond the framework of commercial and artisanal capital which was overturned, at the beginning of the twentieth century, by two outside factors. First of all, there was the discovery and exploitation of oil. Then, there was the implantation of modern industry based on foreign capital, encouraged by the policy of voluntarist modernisation by the Pahlavi monarchy begun by Reza Shah (1926-1941) and continued by his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979).

All classes experienced the overthrow of their modes of life. Most of the time this overthrow was not wished for and was rejected in an overt or subterranean fashion, depending on the time and the sector of society. The monarchic attempt at modernisation was comparable to that which Turkey experienced under Atatürk, including the will to break the influence of the clergy, "liberating" women by the action of the state and overturning traditional communities. The government introduced an agrarian reform which was taken badly by the *Bazaar*, the landowners and the traditionalist mullahs, who shared the same interests and family ties. But Iran was modernised, at least in the towns. The countryside remained far from the centres of power and the winds of reform. The peasants remained attached to the influence of their spiritual representatives who took a dim view of the modernisation of the country and the loss of their privileges.

These two exogenous factors explain the presence of the reactionary component in the revolution of 1979 (the refusal of modern capitalism taken up by the *Bazaar*) associated with the revolutionary component represented by the workers of the big oil (the refinery at Abadan) and mechanical (Tehran) industries.

### *After 1979*

After the revolution of 1979, the new ruling class in Iran tried to nationalise the economy, not only by the statisation of companies but also by cutting itself off from the world market (if not from commodities, at least from credit). This nationalism also explains the important adhesion of the population, and not only the classes united with the regime, such as the merchants of the *Bazaar*. By creating a monopoly of foreign trade, by controlling imports, by attempting an autonomous development and basing itself only on oil as the major source of additional capital, the Iran of the mullahs tried to construct, on its own level, a sort of "socialism in one country" as had previously been tried in the Stalinist USSR and Maoist China.

But this economic nationalism was only based on the nationalisation of oil rent and was not able to develop the accumulation of capital in sufficient proportions. This had two consequences (aggravated by the eight-year war with Iraq and the American embargo):

- On one side, the economy was more and more dependent on the price of oil, which Iran did not control, for its export earnings of foreign currency. The other exportable commodities (carpets, pistachio nuts etc.) could not make up for oil, which constituted 80% of export revenues;
- On the other side, general chronic under-investment never ceased to diminish the possibilities of exporting anything saleable at world market prices. An example? Unable to develop new products, the car factories have continued to make principally just one model for more than thirty years, the Peykan.

On the contrary, the flux of capital from oil rent has allowed the flourishing of a spare parts industry and the maintenance of the present state of the productive apparatus and infrastructure. Iran has been confronted for several years with a grave crisis of capital accumulation, aggravated by the volatility of its oil revenue. More than ever, the system needs foreign capital to renovate its oil industry, whose equipment and installations date essentially from the 1960s.

The only possibility is to obtain credit from Western or Japanese banks. But they are only ready to do this for countries able to meet the criteria of transparency, efficiency and, above all, financial profitability, which Iran cannot and does not want to respect.

The consequence is that, like the Rouble in its time, the Rial, strongly overvalued, is exchanged at two rates: one official, the other real. To reduce this gap, the state has been ever more obliged to draw on its oil windfall. Far from being negligible<sup>4</sup>, the difference in exchange rate of this discredited local currency, costs the state very dear and amounts to many billions of Rials per year. This subsidy to the currency reached 25 billion dollars in 1993<sup>5</sup> and was still 22 billion in 2008!

Another danger threatens the regime, that of the end of food self-sufficiency. If this was once guaranteed, that period is over. The population has grown from 35 to 70 million and the extensive development of agriculture is finished. Arable land is diminishing in area and now makes up barely 35% of the country, eaten away by accelerated urbanisation, and weak productivity remains the rule – due to the domination of small scale ownership, one of the social bases of the regime. Recurring climatic catastrophes (major droughts in 1998-2001) force the import of basic foodstuffs and weaken the influence of a state which remains the first economic actor in the mines, oil, manufacturing industry and transport.

To all this we have to add a refusal of the social constraints imposed by the religious moral order, in particular amongst the new generations who didn't participate in the revolution of 1979. We should remember that today half the population is less than 27 years-old.

## **Oil: lack of investment, insufficient production and unequal division of rent**

### ***The essentials of accumulation...***

In 2007-2008, crude oil contributed 70 billion dollars to Iran's budget, making it around 70% of total revenue<sup>6</sup>. Exports of oil totalled close to 9 billion dollars in the first quarter of 2009, half what it was in the first quarter of 2008<sup>7</sup>. In 2009, sales of crude were reported at less than 40 billion dollars against planned sales of 89 billion. This meant the executive had to draw on oil stabilisation funds.

While the government claims that its budget is balanced if the average barrel price is \$37.5, most economists outside Iran estimate that a price of \$80 is indispensable. The total surplus – including the oil stabilisation funds – fell from 3.8% of GDP the previous year to 0.4% in 2009, according to Capital Intelligence.

The fall in the market price of raw materials and therefore oil rent will not allow a higher level of investment, however much it may be necessary. As for the system of credit, the interest rate environment will be unpredictable as a consequence of the recent global financial crisis. To rebalance its accounts the state envisages two measures which are difficult to put in place. One is massive privatisation, reducing the part of the economy under state control from 75% to 25% and implementing a sales tax (like VAT). But the most effective means of reducing state expenditure would be to diminish, with the aim of abolishing, the various subsidies which represent up to 5% of the GDP of the country. These subsidies, principally dedicated to keeping down the price of petrol (sold at 10 US cents per litre) and natural gas, involve a massive destruction of capital.

<sup>4</sup> 3000 Rials for one dollar at the official rate against about 8500 Rials at the real rate.

<sup>5</sup> Compared with a GDP of 325 billion at this time and 570 billion in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Oil and the big national company, the NIOC – *National Iranian Oil Company* – are in the habit of announcing figures both contradictory and incompatible.

<sup>7</sup> Iran is the fourth largest producer in the world and the second largest exporter. Its production was 3.75 million barrels per day in May, above its quota of 3.334 million barrels per day.

The political prices of energy and other consumer goods are the bedrock of the social policy of the state of the mullahs. It will be necessary to multiply the prices of consumer energy by more than ten to achieve the savings which are necessary. The last attempt at adjusting pump prices, in 2006, immediately led to demonstrations, riots and the looting of petrol stations. The state had to immediately abandon this measure.

### ***... undermined by a chronic productive under-investment...***

The identified oil reserves of Iran are presently equivalent to 138 billion barrels, corresponding to 84 years extraction at constant volume. In 2007-2008, the total production of energy – 5% up on the previous year – reached 2427 million barrels, of which 67.1% was crude oil, 31.9% was natural gas and less than 1% was biomass and other alternative energies. At the same time the country's consumption increased by 6.4%, equivalent to 975 million barrels of crude.

The Iran-Iraq war caused an important amount of damage to Iran's oil installations, in particular the almost complete destruction of the Abadan refinery. The natural rate of decline of Iran's oil production is estimated to be between 4% and 8%, making a fall of 200,000 to 400,000 barrels per day. Because of a chronic lack of investment and maintenance work, the Iranian deposits only offer an average rate of recovery of 27%, much lower than that of comparable deposits in other countries. It is not only the old deposits which suffer from these high costs.

The project of gas re-injection at Aghajari, officially started in June, cannot be effective before October. The production of the deposit, which had fallen to 200,000 barrels per day, against a million barrels per day previously, had to get back up to 300,000. For that, a gas pipeline of 504 km takes the natural gas from the deposit of South Pars, an operation which underlines the very high costs of production of Iran's mature deposits.

The development of the giant gas deposit (with a volume estimated at 10% of world reserves) has suffered a considerable delay and has seen its successive development budgets dramatically increase. Iran's infrastructure is hardly adequate to its present needs. It therefore requires considerable investment to meet the increase in demand.

According to officials of the Oil Ministry, only 48 billion dollars have been invested in the oil sector over the last three years. According to initial estimates, 90 billion should have been invested. The lack of spending on fixed capital and maintenance loses around 500,000 barrels of production per day in the aging deposits of Iran. An increase in capacity demands an investment of between 7000 and 7500 dollars for each additional barrel per day.

### ***... and weighed down by the peculiarly Iranian form of social democracy***

In Iran, petrol, natural gas and electricity are sold according to prices fixed by the state executive. In the case of fuel, which Iran has to import because of its insufficient refining capacity, these are noticeably lower than their costs of production as well as the prices on the world market.

The bill for the "political" prices of energy weighs heavily on the state budget: 48 billion dollars in 2007. Each year, Iranians receive an average individual subsidy of 671 dollars for energy costs. But socialism in a mullah sauce is fundamentally unequal. Rich families are nine times more subsidised than the poorest. The poorest 10% receive only 2.3% of the energy hand-outs; the richest layer, 19.5%. The geographical distribution of these subsidies indicates that it is the rural population who receive 79.2% of the total, against 20.8% in urban areas. The urban poor are without doubt the greatest losers in this distribution.

Faced with the threat of economic sanctions, the leaders of the energy sector declare themselves ready to put a plan for fuel self-sufficiency in place. This "highly confidential" plan seems scarcely credible given the serious inability of the country to provide petrol and diesel.

Despite two years of rationing, the demand for petrol grows at an annual rate of 6%, above all because the number of vehicles increases by 700,000 per year.

### ***Faced with budgetary suffocation, the state turns towards foreign capital***

For two years, NIOC has negotiated with the Turkish firm TPAO which can invest 12 billion dollars in gas exploitation. The Russian companies Gazprom and Tatneft are also interested. A contract worth 5 billion dollars for part of the development of South Pars was signed with the Chinese giant CNPC in 2009.

Iran intends to export natural gas to Europe via the Nabucco gas pipeline or another which goes through Turkey. The two countries have signed an agreement for the annual export of 35 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas to Europe.

A consortium of Japanese, Korean and Norwegian companies is participating in the development production units for LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas).

With the exception of American ones, numerous big western companies (Total, ENI, Repsol) have a foot in Iran. But it is the smaller firms from the second rank countries (Vietnam, Croatia, Belarus, Indonesia and, above all, Turkey and Malaysia) which are the most active in the market.

If they depend on the capital and technology of big foreign companies, the Iranians also have an important influence on the oil sectors of Ecuador and Bolivia. No less than 80% of the foreign sales of oil are handled by the Swiss middlemen Vitol and Trafigura. The Indian company Reliance and another Swiss company, Glencore, handle the rest of the exports. But the local Islamic foundations (*bonyad*) also try to get involved in the oil business.

Japan (more than 500,000 barrels per day) is the largest importer of Iranian crude, followed by China, South Korea, Taiwan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

### ***Attempts to modernise Iranian capitalism***

To try to get out of this crisis, the ruling class launched a series of economic reforms starting in 1994 pursued under Khatami's presidency (from 1997 to 2005). They aimed at modernising Iran, notably by injecting foreign capital. The changes have produced, as already seen in various other places<sup>8</sup>, a deterioration in the industrial fabric which was protected since 1979 and which could not withstand the increased competition<sup>9</sup>.

From the start the reforms involved investing in the sphere of interest-bearing capital and abandoned, apart from a few quibbles, religious principles in economic matters. They decreed the end of 0% loans from the Islamic Bank (*Markazi Johmouri Islami*), and established lines of credit for businesses intended to encourage an domestically-rooted development of capital.

This was followed by an opening towards the outside with the aim of attracting foreign capital. But to do this, it was necessary to clear away all the old ways of the system and to show that this had been done. The Khatami initiative, which partly just carried on what Rafsandjani had started, explained itself and justified itself in the light of this context. By launching a process of privatisation of the "dead weights" of the state, by allowing the creation of new banks and supporting the spirit of enterprise, the reforming executive of Khatami clearly opted for a capitalist strategy compatible with the world market.

This strategy could not avoid colliding with the supposedly egalitarian social compromise on which the theocratic state based its domination. Liberalisation and the end of certain state monopolies translated into unemployment and poverty for the workers, in a country which already had 20% official unemployment – almost 30% in reality – and where, as in other parts of the world, many people had to have two jobs in order to live. By undermining some import controls, the appearance of new commodities risked competing with the merchants of the *Bazaar*, one of the important social bases of the regime.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Argentina under Peron in 1951 or in 1974.

<sup>9</sup> This is the case in the textile industry where the reforms resulted in redundancies for thousands of workers. This explains why some of them preferred Ahmadinejad.

## ***Ruling class fractions in collision***

The structure of the ruling class in Iran shows some originality in mixing a number of aspects of state capitalism with that of liberal capitalism. These are the principal fractions of the local bourgeoisie and the central sectors of the classic petty-bourgeoisie:

- the artisanal traditional industry, notably carpets;
- small entrepreneurs (some of whom come directly from the ranks of the artisans) with an industrial orientation (around 50,000 workplaces employing close to 1.5 million people<sup>10</sup>). They are chomping at the bit for capitalist normalisation of the conditions of production and exchange. They demand the right to do what they want with the profits generated from the businesses which they own;
- the immense band of parallel economy artisanal services (truck drivers etc.) ;
- the *Bazaar* and its mercantile capitalists specialising in consumer goods;
- the *Pasdaran* who run state companies or companies where the state intervenes. These are dedicated to the most modern methods.

As in the ex-USSR, the state controls foreign trade and is the owner of the means of transport (from railways to airlines), the mines, the extraction and refining of oil, energy production, so-called basic industries (steel, heavy engineering) and assembly factories (cars, for example).

Who decides the allocation of the capital coming from oil rent and towards which sectors: this is what is really at stake in the present conflicts within the ruling class in Iran.

The leaders of the oil sector sympathetic to the reformers, have been replaced by those close to Ahmadinejad such as Mohamed Ali Khatibi, Iran's OPEC representative, or Gholam Hossein Nozari, the Oil Minister.

The taking of power by the President's men is accompanied by the rise to power of foundations like the *Pasdaran* Jihad Construction, which has become one of the most important subcontractors in oil engineering. The riots and demonstrations didn't touch the installations producing hydrocarbons, and these never ceased to function. Neither the production of hydrocarbons, nor their export was affected, despite the presence of a significant number of so-called reformers among the management professionals and leaders of the oil sector.

## ***The Pasdaran's creeping coup d'état***

### ***A long history***

If many Iranian dissidents see the last election as a coup d'état led by Ahmadinejad and the *Pasdaran*, it was in fact the first election of Ahmadinejad, in 2005, which saw the seizure of several essential levers of the state apparatus by the Corps of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (*Sepah e Pasdaran e Enqelab e Eslami*, shortened to *Pasdaran*, "guardians" in English) and their allies.

Founded in May 1979, the *Pasdaran* organisation was created as a military force separated from the traditional army, whose allegiance was entirely to Ayatollah Khomeini. At their origin the *Pasdaran* were a close-knit guard whose mission was to counter any desire for a coup d'état on the part of the military. They were involved in border control and thus in the fight against armed leftist groups or separatist groups coming from the ethnic minorities (Kurds, Baluchis, etc.). Their role was extended during the second phase of the Iran-Iraq war, where they were the spearhead of particularly tough military offensives.

At the end of the war and after the death of Khomeini in 1989, Ali Khamenei took on the post of Supreme Guide of the Islamic Republic. Relatively isolated inside the clergy, he decided to give priority to political links with the *Pasdaran* which he had begun to cultivate during the war.

After a first period in which the *Pasdaran* were marginalised from political life (a period corresponding to the two terms of president Rafsandjani, from 1989 to 1997), they came back on the scene thanks to the rallying of the clergy most faithful to the theocratic ideology which seemed to be threatened by the reformers led by Khatami (president from 1997 to 2005). The *Pasdaran* once again took on the role of political police and of controlling potentially subversive activities, a role that had abandoned in the 1990s.

The so-called conservatives, gathered around Khamenei, used the *Pasdaran* not only as a strike force but also as an apparatus of propaganda to mobilise the reactionary parts of civil society against the reformers'

<sup>10</sup> Compare this with the number of workers in industry and the mines, which is around 6.25 million.



timid attempts at opening up and democratising. Thanks to the support of part of the clergy, the *Pasdaran* could reinforce their influence inside the state and the economic sectors which it depends on. From heavy industry to the *bonyad*<sup>11</sup>, smuggled alcohol and drugs, the *Pasdaran* put down roots either directly or by using their networks of influence (old members, family or informal relations etc.) in all the articulations of power.

### **The return to the scene**

Starting in 2003, the US invasion of Iraq reinforced the legitimacy of the *Pasdaran* in the eyes of other Iranian political fractions. In the face of the “Great Satan”, perceived as a more and more immediate threat, the *Pasdaran* elaborated a strategy of non-conventional war<sup>12</sup> in which their troops and the *Basij* would play the central role, that of mobilisation and coordination of an army of guerrillas and popular resistance. What’s more, their long-time alliance with Khamenei gave them an important influence over the government and parliament. The Supreme Guide decides the composition<sup>13</sup> of the powerful Council of Guardians. This council partially controls the legislative and executive authorities by authorising or blocking the candidates in various elections and blocking laws adopted by parliament which are judged not to conform to Islam. Nevertheless, this part of the state apparatus does not directly control the actions of the government and parliament. This resulted in the dysfunction of the whole of the executive when the reformers were in charge of it.

The danger posed by the US and its allies in the region and the possibility of new offensives from the so-called reformers convinced the leadership of the *Pasdaran* that the time had come to centralise all the power of the executive in their hands. The electoral victories, in parliament in 2004 and the presidency in 2005, gave them access to two of the important institutions of the state which still escaped their direct control.

### **The Basij**

If the *Pasdaran* are a professional army corps, the *Basij e Mostazafan* (“Mobilisation of the oppressed”) were founded in 1980 on the model of a mass popular militia. Straight after the Islamic revolution their premier role was to take on the tasks of the police and to form a primary network of information deeply implanted in civil society. Although at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war the *Basij* were kept well away from the front, they ended up playing a central role in the human wave assaults composed of “volunteers”, sometimes scarcely adolescents, often recruited by force and indoctrinated with a sacrificial view in the face of the much better equipped Iraqi troops.

Still today the *Basij* is the first level of control, intelligence, informing and repression within civil society. “*The Basij is present in almost all sectors of Iranian society; there are units of Basij specially organised for students, local tribes, factory workers etc.*”<sup>14</sup>, to which we must add, and this is very important, in the poor neighbourhoods. The militia also replaces the police when it cannot intervene (for example, in the universities where it is forbidden to enter) or when the state needs to strike in a particularly brutal manner. This is why the *Basij* is the most hated instrument of the regime and is often the first one to be condemned by the rebels (as for example at the end of the demonstration on 15 June).

The *Basij* recruit principally from the most precarious elements of Iranian society. According to various estimates, the *Basij* comprises from one to three million members (that is to say from one inhabitant in 75 to one in 25, ignoring ages and sexes). This corps guarantees its control function in two other ways: firstly, providing funds to the less privileged in various forms (loans, student grants, unemployment benefits, supplementary pensions) to those who regularly participate in militia training. The *Basij* thus acts as a social shock absorber. Secondly, by attaching the poorest part of the proletariat to the state, whether through ideological indoctrination or financial interest, it constitutes the most important vehicle for class division.

<sup>11</sup> These Islamic “charitable foundations” are trusts which escape the control of the state while receiving part of its budget, and are active in numerous sectors, like finance, tourism, industry and, recently, the extraction and transport of hydrocarbons. (*Destructive competition: Factionalism and Rent-Seeking in Iran*, Bjorvatn & Selvik, 2008, <http://www.nhh.no/en/research---faculty/departement-of-economics/sam/cv/bjorvatn,-kjetil.aspx> ).

<sup>12</sup> The demonstration, on a reduced scale, of the relative efficacy of this type of strategy against a modern army by Hezbollah in the Lebanon in the summer of 2006 reinforced the credibility of the *Pasdaran*.

<sup>13</sup> Directly, by designating half of its members, and indirectly for the other half, who are elected by the parliament through a panel presented by the chief of the judicial authority, who is himself designated by... the Supreme Guide.

<sup>14</sup> “*The Rise of the Pasdaran*”, RAND Corporation 2009.

## Rivalries within the state after the *Pasdaran's* coup

### **A basic summary**

Seen from inside the ruling factions, the conflict can be characterised as a power struggle between:

- On one side, the camp of power, that is to say the *Pasdaran*, allied to a classically theocratic part of the clergy led by Khamenei;
- On the other, the camp of the opposition: the reformers, represented by Khatami, and the liberals (on the level of the economy at least), led by Rafsandjani.

In 2005, although supported by the Supreme Guide and the conservative theocratic clergy, the *Pasdaran* candidate, Ahmadinejad, didn't hesitate in leading a campaign around themes which were not only populist but also anti-clerical. He strongly emphasised his humble origins and his reputation for honesty, integrity and fidelity to the ideals of the Islamic revolution. The mullahs who faced him, including Khatami and Rafsandjani, were accused, often justly, of corruption and complicity with the Americans. Ahmadinejad thus tried to channel the strongly felt resentment of an important part of the population, mainly urban, towards the clergy who had led the country since the revolution. The *Pasdaran* and the *Basij* enjoy a good image in the countryside because of their efforts at modernising infrastructure, the opening of local workshops which they run, the influence of their charitable foundations (*bonyad*) and the funds given out to those who take part in *Basij* paramilitary training at least once a month. Ahmadinejad also benefits from a certain amount of support from the urban poor, which he came from, and who gain from the policy of benefits distributed through the *Pasdaran* networks.

### **On the side of the opposition**

The opposition faction has succeeded in rallying the groups disillusioned with the government: the *Bazaar* upset by inflation and the economic crisis, as well as the majority of the clergy marginalised from power by the *Pasdaran*. The prestige enjoyed by Khatami as the symbol of the democratic struggle has enabled him to rally young people enthused by freedom to the Moussavi candidature.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't have any illusions about the permanence of such an alliance and the political aims of the various components of the Iranian political opposition. If today they are on the same side, it is only because of the polarisation provoked by the conquest of executive power by the *Pasdaran*. If it is still possible to believe in the bourgeois democratic aspirations of Khatami, it is more difficult to have the same confidence in Moussavi and Rafsandjani. A former president of the Republic, today head of the Assembly of Experts and the Council of Judgment, Rafsandjani remains an influential member of the state. Despite his support for Moussavi, he always avoids taking too much risk by criticising the regime too overtly. In 1999, he didn't hesitate to use one of the Friday sermons to claim that foreign powers were responsible for the student protest movement and to rejoice in the use of force against the young rebels, just like Khamenei and Ahmadinejad today.

As for Moussavi, he was the Prime Minister of Iran from 1981 to 1989. He thus actively participated in putting in place the apparatus of repression and terror against opponents of the Islamic Republic. That this apparatus should now be directed against a movement that he'd like to lead might seem somewhat ironic if it wasn't for the treatment of its victims who, unlike Moussavi, have constantly fought for the end of the Islamic regime, from the 1980s until today.

### **On the side of those in power**

The camp of those in power is no longer immune from internal conflicts. If the central command of the *Pasdaran* seems for the moment to ensure cohesion, the movement of last summer revealed the tensions between the other components. On one side there are the *Basij* playing the role of the most radical faction of the state, and on the other there is an informal faction coming out of the *Pasdaran*, proposing a more pragmatic policy and open to a serious compromise between competing fractions. This latter faction rallies around influential individuals, all coming from the *Pasdaran*, with which they are directly linked and who possess important positions within the state.

The Mohsen Rezai candidature is the visible face of this faction. After the elections, Rezai did not hesitate to denounce irregularities in the counting of the votes while keeping his distance from the reformers. Rezai, Mohammad Ghalibaf, mayor of Tehran, and Ali Larijani<sup>15</sup>, the parliamentary speaker, have, throughout the time of the movement, regularly criticised the policy of repression by the state and in particular the positions of Ahmadinejad<sup>16</sup>, particularly after the news of the death in custody of the son of one of the advisers close to Rezai, following physical abuse at the hands of the forces of repression. These phenomena have to be understood as a result of the growing tensions between the *Basij*, the most reactionary wing of the regime whose reproduction depends solely on oil rent, and part, clearly a minority, of the *Pasdaran* who are taking on a role which is more and more technocratic and less military, and so downplay the ideology of the regime (and thus the role of the clergy).

Conscious of these tensions, the Supreme Guide, as usual, plays off one camp against the other with the aim of safeguarding his hegemony. On 15 August he named Sadeq Larijani (the brother of Ali Larijani) as the head of the judiciary with the aim of weakening Ahmadinejad's faction.

The US administration is counting on the influence of the more pragmatic faction of the *Pasdaran* to advance its diplomatic objectives concerning Iran. The various dances of Iran around the nuclear dossier, as well as the recent reestablishment of official diplomatic links (broken since the Hostage Crisis of 1979), testify to a weakening of Ahmadinejad to the advantage of his rival conservatives.

## A bit of geopolitics: Obama against the democratic movement

Faced with the threat that Iran represented to the regional interests of the US and its allies, the policy of the Bush administration was to encircle and isolate Iran, by means of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and that of Iraq in 2003. However, far from reducing the regional influence of Iran, the two conflicts had the opposite effect. In Iraq particularly, there was, on the one hand, a Shiite community favourable to Iran which finally came to power with the blessing of the Bush administration and, on the other, armed groups coming out of the same community, to which Iran offered human, logistical and material support, when it didn't control them directly. The unpopularity, to some extent all over the world, of the two military operations led by the American military allowed the Iranian state to justify the existence of its clandestine nuclear programme and to not incur reprisals. Inside the country, the sacred unity against the American threat strongly accelerated the rise of the *Pasdaran*.

Learning some lessons from the defeat of the previous government's plan (at least as far as Iran was concerned), the Obama government explored a new approach. Starting during his election campaign, Barack Obama put forward the project of unconditional discussions with Iran, notably on the subjects of the situation in Iraq and Iran's nuclear programme. What's more, Obama promised to his electors, in very vague terms and without any precise commitment to dates or numbers, the rapid withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. In order to achieve this he needed to find some points of agreement with Iran in order to obtain the pacification of the Iraqi Shiite militias created by Tehran. Obama had to also gain the support of Iran, at least formally, against Al-Qaida and the Taliban (both Sunni organisations). He had to do all this without forgetting to get the intense negotiations around the subject of the nuclear programme under way.

In this framework, the movement of contestation of power during the months of June and July 2009 posed several problems for the heads of the two states. On the Iranian side, at least on the level of the talks, it was a question of conserving the facade of unity of the leading offices of the regime and making the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad government appear to come from the will of the majority of Iranian civil society. These two objectives were undermined by the movement. On the side of the US, it was a question of choosing between a democratic revolution with only a very small success, at the cost of wiping out any diplomatic link with Iran, and a state which is totalitarian but stable, which the Obama administration had already re-established links with.

<sup>15</sup> Ex-negotiator of the nuclear programme and partisan of negotiations with the US on the subject, he was relieved of his post in 2007 following disagreements with Ahmadinejad.

<sup>16</sup> On 25 June, Ghalibaf said "we have to take into account the passions of the people in connection with this election and this will not be resolved by violence" (*New York Times*, 25 June 2009), and Larijani didn't hesitate in declaring that few people found the election result credible, and also questioned the partiality of the Council of Guardians on this subject.

To the displeasure of those who had never stopped denouncing the supposed fascist tendencies of George W. Bush, while dreaming of a renewal of the democratic ideal under his successor, it seemed as if the roles had reversed as far as Iran was concerned. The stabilisation of the activity of the clandestine Shiite militias, the attack (under the cover of the neutrality of the US army) by the Iraqi police on the camp where militants of the People's Mujahedine were detained<sup>17</sup>, the freeing by the US army of some members (including leaders suspected of having ordered the killing of captured American soldiers) of the Shiite militia, *Asa'ib al-Haq*, linked to Iran and, finally, the declaration on 18 August 2009 by Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iranian envoy to the United Nations, of the acceptance of discussion without preconditions on the nuclear dossier were some elements which lead us to think that the diplomatic opening of the American administration had begun to bear fruit thanks to subterranean agreements - accords probably arrived at even before the official reestablishment of diplomatic links in September 2009.

### **Popular discontent breaks the surface**

The demonstrations at the beginning of the week of 15 June were massive and united, on an interclassist basis, Iranians of all ages and social origins, in silent marches which were, despite the confrontations on their margins, essentially peaceful. At the head of this movement, we could see young urban proletarians, often students, including a large number of women. The educated youth did not hesitate to directly confront the forces of order and regularly gave a new breath to the movement by their mobilisation in moments of discouragement. Although they were often a minority during the confrontations, they received many kinds of support from other participants in the demonstrations – encouragement, blocking the cops during arrests – as well as from those who remained passive: the numerous residents and shopkeepers who opened their doors to give refuge to the demonstrators, even when the state said it would prosecute anyone giving aid to trouble-makers.

This movement presents several aspects that we are going to set out in detail.

Firstly, under the present yoke of the Islamic Republic, oscillating between obscurantist theocracy and its own brand of fascism, the extension of individual and democratic freedoms is likely to create objective conditions more favourable to class struggle. This is in spite of the limits of the movement; in particular the absence within it, for the moment at least, of a proletarian fraction capable of putting forward the interests of the exploited class.

Secondly, the fact that the movement came out of an election, and slogans such as “where is my vote?”, mustn't make us forget that if Iranians supported Moussavi, it wasn't just to elect him or to kick out Ahmadinejad, but above all to express their opposition to the oppression that green fascism subjects them to on a daily basis, as well as against the most repressive aspects of a police state and the agonies of a theocratic ideology which is as burdensome as it is outdated.

Thirdly, in a context of the global reinforcement of political Islam<sup>18</sup>, this active and massive contestation of Iranian theocracy is the first attack on a serious scale by led by civil society against one of the most reactionary ideological expressions of it in existence today. The important presence of women in its avant-garde, including during the most dangerous confrontations, is exemplary for all those who are oppressed across the world by the yokes of religion and male domination.

This being the case, it is not right or useful to ignore the various limits of the popular movement that were not breached, for the moment at least. The most important immediate issue was its inability to respond in a collective, and therefore organised, manner to the violence of the state and above all that of the *Basij* militia. Certainly, on a few occasions the demonstrators succeeded in gaining the upper hand by, for example, pushing back the forces of the police with showers of projectiles or even lynching members of the *Basij* and burning their vehicles. But, from a global perspective, the movement was incapable of containing the violence dumped on them by the state. Massive arrests, torture and murders have, for the moment, got the better of the determination of the opponents of the regime. The scale of this repression also gives an indication of the power of the state relative to that of the movement.

What's more, we mustn't forget that those who have been the most effective in putting this repression in place, the members of the *Basij*, are drawn from the poorest strata of the urban and rural proletariat. There has not appeared, within the movement, an independent proletarian fraction able to take the fight to its most extreme consequences. The capacity of the state to obtain the support, by means of material

<sup>17</sup>But let's not cry over the fate of the old perpetrators of Saddam's dirty work, who didn't hesitate to drown the revolts of the Shiite and Kurdish populations against the Iraqi dictatorship in blood.

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion about the category of political Islam, see the *Lettre de Mouvement Communiste n°29*.

and ideological corruption, of a very large number of Iranian proletarians and peasants, against their own class interests, has been the main weapon against the movement. What is certain, is that in the absence of a highly improbable disintegration of the *Basij* and the networks of clientelism of the *Pasdaran*, any democratic movement in Iran is condemned to defeat if it is not capable of associating itself with living forces coming out of the proletariat coagulated around an independent class politics.

Finally, the absence of any formulated objectives other than the replacement of Ahmadinejad by Moussavi has not helped the movement either, quite the contrary. In this connection, the rallying cry of “*Allahu Akbar*” launched by the demonstrators reveals many weaknesses. Even if we put aside the religious implications (the slogan was taken up even by atheists!), by only making reference to the revolution of 1979<sup>19</sup>, it shows the incapacity of the movement to unify itself on more solid and clearer bases, including those inspired by modern bourgeois democratic ideology. By believing themselves to be attached to the preceding revolution, today’s oppositionists only reproduce its errors. We must keep in mind that the state knows how to make use of this slogan, choosing it on several occasions as a way to target those who, for obvious reasons, have rejected it in favour of explicitly political slogans. The state therefore makes use of a supposedly unifying slogan to separate its more radical opponents from the others.

These weaknesses, along with repression, have had the result of allowing what Moussavi and Khatami have to say to appear as a credible alternative: the integration of protest, led by the legal vote and by the means of peaceful demonstrations, in the power game between mullahs. In this sense, the demonstration on the day for Palestine, 18 September, marked a great victory for the Iranian state, even if it was in a different form than Ahmadinejad wanted. Ten of thousands of true or fake oppositionists, led by Khatami and Moussavi, joined in one of the ritual demonstrations organised by the state, chanting slogans just as nationalist and reactionary as those of the major part of the participants who supported Ahmadinejad. The latter were much more numerous and the oppositionists marched under the benevolent protection of the police to avoid being lynched. It had come full circle, Moussavi and Khatami came out of the whole affair with an increased credibility and a reserved place on the benches of the institutional opposition for the duration of the presidential mandate. On its side, the weakened government of Ahmadinejad had already had to face criticisms from its own camp. The Islamic Republic was saved. Khamenei was relieved from having to defend his position not only from the threat of a democratic revolution, but also from that of a coup d’état from the *Pasdaran*.

Despite this, the possibility of a revival of protest from below is not negligible. The start of the academic year was marked by sporadic spontaneous demonstrations on the campuses. On 4 November, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the taking of hostages at the American embassy, new confrontations broke out in Tehran between demonstrators and the forces of repression. The slogans seemed to have changed, openly targeting the Supreme Guide, and calling on Obama to take a side, the government or the demonstrators: “*Obama, you are with them or you are with us*”.

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<sup>19</sup>In very different conditions – where it therefore meant something different – this slogan was one of the most important of the revolution of 1979. So it was that thirty years later the inhabitants of the major cities revisited one of the tactics of the previous revolution, getting up onto the roofs and chanting this slogan (along with some others) and showing that whatever was happening on the streets during the day, the revolutionary movement continued to defy state control.

## The oppression of women at the heart of the dictatorship of capital in Iran

### **Some basic facts**

Forced to wear the *chador* when they are nine years old, girls are from then on separated from a society which is under the totalitarian control of males. They are separated physically, by an article of clothing which they find too hot and which stops them from running or playing like the boys. They are separated subjectively, by being forbidden to laugh or talk too loudly, so as to affirm their status relative to men, as well as by an education which aims to make them into submissive wives and mothers. They are told endlessly that the *chador* is to protect them from the base instincts of males who they must fear and, above all, who they must avoid provoking, which they can do just by attracting their attention. If the latter lose control of themselves then it is accepted that the fault rest with the “temptresses”. The young woman learns very quickly that she is not only dependent on men (father and brother first, then her husband) to protect her but also on older women (in particular her mother) who are generally the first vector of transmission of traditional values and warnings against men outside the family cell and even against other women. The imposition of the dress code is carried out by terror, with members of the *Basij* put in charge of harshly repressing any infringement of the rules. A strand of hair sticking out can lead to punishment by lashing.

Once they are adults, only a minority of women are able to work<sup>20</sup>, although they make up 60% of enrolled students<sup>21</sup> in higher education. For the great majority of them, the Islamic regime only allows one very simple choice: marriage, prostitution or, for those from a sufficiently well-off background, exile.

Outside of marriage it is forbidden for young people to associate with the opposite sex, including to march down the street together. The *Basij* hold sway here as well.

When they are married (as they can be from the age of nine), women are not allowed to leave the family home (including to work) without the permission of their husband, women in the plural because polygamy is allowed. The husband can decide to divorce one of his wives without giving a reason. Starting divorce proceedings is much more complicated for a woman, in particular for those who are victims of domestic violence. When a divorce happens, the children are *de facto* given to the husband. Once she is divorced a woman is stuck with a social stigma difficult to remove - she finds herself without resources and with difficulties finding work or returning to her parental home. Adultery is punished by stoning. According to the law (Article 102 of the penal code), men must be buried up to the waist and women up to the chest before execution. This leaves a chance for a man to escape from the stones. This has enormous importance, because according to Islamic law those who survive the punishment, by digging themselves out for example... have the right to freedom.

Islamic law considers the testimony of a woman witness to be worth half that of a man. The blood price, for crimes committed against a woman, is also half that for the same crime against a man.

### **A long history of attempts at emancipation**

However, the situation has not always been so disastrous. From the nineteenth century women refused to wear the veil and activists toured the Iranian countryside preaching emancipation. Then, after Reza came to power in 1926, the fight was carried on by means of education: public education organised by the state. Up until then this was in the hands of religious people and reserved exclusively for boys. However, this was not the case for educational establishments founded by Christian missionaries, which favoured the education of girls from the beginning of the nineteenth century. These establishments were attended by religious minorities and part of the Iranian elite.

State schools opened their doors to girls despite the opposition of traditionalists and the clergy<sup>22</sup>. However, the reformers favourable to this project didn't see the school as a springboard for women wanting to play a wider role in society.

<sup>20</sup> Many quota systems for enrolment by sex, discriminating against women, have been progressively put in place since 2002 with the aim of limiting their representation in fields such as engineering and medicine.

<sup>21</sup> In 1996, 11.2 % of women aged 15-64 had a job. Despite their higher level of education, there are scarcely 14% in jobs in public administration.

<sup>22</sup> In 1922, there were 7500 girl pupils (17% in secondary education). There were 88,000 in 1941 (28% in secondary education). Mixed schools were created. That same year, the doors of the universities opened to women.

The first measures against the clergy were taken in 1920. The mullahs had to obtain a permit to be able to wear the turban. They were removed from their functions as notaries and judges by the reform of the judicial system. In 1928, the law on uniformity of clothing was passed. The wearing of the *kolah pahlavi* (peaked cap) as headgear was imposed on men.

From 1934 the imperial regime set about the forced emancipation of women, notably by banning the veil and ordering the police to forcibly remove it from those who didn't comply. This sort of measure was very badly received by the traditionalists who reacted by removing their daughters from the schools, the principal place where these measures were applied. Amongst the poor, few were ready to turn their back on tradition<sup>23</sup>.

Mohammad Reza came to the throne in 1941 and carried on with the transformations launched by his father. In 1963, the regime gave women the right to vote, despite the opposition of the devout.

In 1967, the law on protection of the family was promulgated: the right to divorce, the right to abortion, access to jobs previously reserved for men in the judicial and military administrations... The legal age for marriage was set at 15 for girls and 18 for boys. In 1971, the Shah set out a project, never implemented, of sending social science students into even the most isolated villages with the mission of spreading the good name of the regime, so as to counter the influence of the clergy amongst the local populations. The mullahs travelled around even the most far flung provinces of the country to meet their faithful. This meant they could claim to be the lawful representatives of the country, whereas the administration was perceived as a foreign entity.

All the same, on 8 March 1979, only a month after the coming to power of Khomeini and the installation of Islamic law, Iranians took to the streets to shout out their refusal of Sharia law. Isolated, rapidly abandoned by the extreme-left groups still marked by machismo and who suffered an intense repression, the feminists were easily defeated and swept away by the state.

### ***Iranian women and the revolution of 1979***

In this situation, the extent of the step backwards after 1979 appears incredible if we don't take account of the following facts: the nature of the reforms increasing the freedom for women, which had been decided by the state without any sizeable feminist movement to carry them forward (and eventually able to defend them); the real situation of women in the poorest layers of society, in particular in the countryside, which was a long way from that of the minority of city women who'd benefited from the provision of public education and a secular environment; the perception men had of liberated city women as a nascent threat to their hegemony.

These elements opened the way for the clergy to denounce the reforms as a corruption of traditional values by a forced "westernisation" decided by a decadent elite. The ideology of the mullahs, like all fascist or authoritarian ideologies (and therefore also all the other variants of Political Islam), primarily rests on a vision of the family where the women are confined to the home, reduced to the role of baby-machines and slaves and cut off from all aspects of their social lives. It is a structure where the figure of the head of the family exists as an echo of the Supreme Guide, the Leader to which the head of the family submits because the leader maintains the head of the family's wife and, by extension, all women, as slaves.

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<sup>23</sup> At that time, three quarters of the population were nomads or living in rural areas remote from the towns.

Thus, the condition of women is the most intense expression of all the oppressions imposed by the Iranian theocracy. A more democratic transformation of the regime is impossible without the following two conditions being fulfilled: the emancipation of women from the family sphere, but above all, their massive participation in the movement of transformation with the aim of politically and materially defending their specific interests.

Nevertheless, some women can believe the existing state of things suits them, and the mullahs make a point of encouraging them. Khomeini himself, after the revolution, declared: “*we witnessed the revolt of our Muslim women during our Revolution [...]. These women took to the streets, rebelled, shed their blood and some died so that our revolution should be victorious.*”<sup>24</sup>

By codifying the role and the place of women in all social activities, the regime has “reassured” those in the most backward social layers. On the other hand, it is obvious that the social visibility of women is an illusion: what is the point in brilliant higher education studies, for example, if you are forbidden access to a job, and the prison of rules and codes imposed is a complete negation of the social being of women?

### ***The return of feminist militancy***

Despite all this, even if covered by the *chador*, numerous girls and young women from the lowest and most traditionalist layers of society went to school (today, almost 80% of female Iranians older than six can read and write, as against 36% in 1976). Even Islamic militantism (the institutional “revolutionary” foundations) have been a means for women to leave the home. The reconquest of public space by women has been slow but inexorable. The ideology says that women should remain at home but events have pushed them outside it: the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), various crises, the necessity to work, particularly for proletarians, and their involvement in independent social organisations: assistance groups for street children, the Women’s Cultural Centre (founded in 2003, organised as an “NGO” – in fact it is made up of associations resembling non-profit organisations in France). The activists coordinate actions, seminars, etc. What’s more these “NGOs” are sometimes a means of camouflaging more militant activities.

Civil society has transformed itself in recent years, particularly in the cities. Circles of friends and “NGOs” form a kind of secular counter-power, mostly cultural. Despite the obligation to wear the veil in public and the official maintenance of the traditional status of inferiority, Iran is the one Islamic country where feminism is a reality. Veiled women go out on their own, to demonstrate (as for example during the gatherings of the mothers of prisoners after the demonstrations of last autumn), to work and to study. It is a hard fight, particularly in the countryside and the small towns, but it’s also an important phenomenon with few other examples in the Muslim world.

This militancy reappeared after the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Khomeini in 1989, when the mullahs once again took up the call for a woman’s role limited to the home. In Iran there are three currents nominally for women’s rights. There are the traditionalist Muslims (clerical families, *Bazaar*), for whom the Sharia is the source of the law. They call for the return to active social life while remaining separated from men. There are the modernist Muslims (originating from the traditional, but educated and working, middle class), who want to reform the law so as to improve the status of women and base their ideas on a modern interpretation of Sharia (as set out in the magazine *Zanan* founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992 and banned in 2008). Finally, there are the secular modernists (coming from the highly educated modern middle class). They do not consider the Sharia as a source of legislation and they demand the separation of mosque and state. But these activists clash with each other less and less and the differences in the politico-religious order become blurred, the feminist movement becomes more general and the points of view converge. Despite its limits, the existence of a women’s movement provides a unique chance and a great hope for the proletarian cause.

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<sup>24</sup>Marie Ladier-Fouladi, “Démographie, société et changements politiques en Iran”, in *Esprit*, August 2001.



### ***For permanent revolution on the periphery of the capitalist world market***

Iran has been the site of a radical democratic movement of some size. This shows that on the periphery of capital, as in Burma, Tibet and Nepal<sup>25</sup>, demands belonging to a phase long passed on a global level are always still relevant. But contrary to what happened in Nepal, in Iran the working class has not expressed itself as such. In this connection, we wrote:

*“If we interest ourselves in struggles in which the proletariat plays a significant role but has not yet been able to crystallise its political force in a manner which is independent of the bourgeois or petty bourgeois formations, it doesn't just apply to these countries (amongst others) which are on the periphery of capital but above all as an indication of what could happen in their big neighbour, China.”*<sup>26</sup>

The working class neighbourhoods on the edge of the big Iranian cities remained silent. No strike, that most elementary form of expression of the working class, was born in the factories. In particular, there was nothing in that sector crucial for the survival of the state, the production of hydrocarbons. It was this sector that brought about the downfall of the Shah's regime in 1979, when the workers went over to the side of the revolution. Certainly, the situation of the working class in Iran is not brilliant. As in the old Stalinist countries, the unions<sup>27</sup> are direct organs of the state for control and repression in workplaces. The smallest strike or demonstration is harshly repressed by the *Basij* and the police. The few modernisation reforms of the economic system undertaken since 1994 have contributed to a certain minimal rationalisation of a productive infrastructure artificially protected by the monopoly of foreign trade. But this has thrown thousands out of work and plunged them into the grey economy.

For the moment, the oil and gas workers, watched very closely but also well paid and pampered by the regime, have not shown the least desire to fight and their passivity and resignation weighs heavily on other, weaker, sections of the working class in Iran. Finally, the generation of 1979, who created the councils and workers' committees and who, notably in Tehran, took possession of territory by its struggles for housing, services (water, electricity) and transport, was beaten by the mullahs' regime. The evidence shows that the consequences of this defeat for the proletariat have still not gone away. However, strikes like that of the public transport in Tehran in 2006 or even that of the sugar cane workers in *Haft Tapeh* in 2008 show that rank-and-file workers' struggles regularly break out. We therefore continue to watch out for them with the still feeble means of information at our disposal.

On the other hand, in contrast with the absence of worker expression, the recent popular movement has known how to articulate and circulate the revolt of women. As we've written in our group presentation, *“we must take account [from the point of view of revolutionary contribution] of those from sectors of society which, even if they are not directly subjected to exploitation as such, are the object of innumerable oppressions produced by the succession of modes of production founded on class division. Above all we are thinking here of women, engaged in a millennia-long fight for the destruction of male supremacy. They definitely constitute an essential social factor in the future proletarian revolution. These various components of the society of capital, and others as well (including many oppressed national and religious minorities), have an interest in common with the revolutionary workers: putting an end to profoundly unjust social relations and finishing with the archaic structures now rendered obsolete by the immense productive forces that social cooperation has created over the centuries”*

Given the situation in Iran, it is fantastic that women take to the streets and don't hesitate to confront the forces of repression, with a paving stone in their hand and a smile on their lips. It is an insult to the regime, and a greeting to all the oppressed of Iran and elsewhere.

Another encouraging factor is that the educated youth of the big cities show an extraordinary continuity in combat against the regime, and this despite their relative isolation and the systematic repression which they are subjected to. A country with such an accelerated urbanisation in which half the population is less than 27 years old definitely constitutes a permanent and growing threat to the men in power, whoever they are. The leaders of the opposition, like those in power, know this very well. The educated youth in revolt is another inestimable resource for the working class.

Today the ideological and material basis of the Iranian state, its capacity to co-opt wide sections of the population, still has little in common with that of the Shah's regime, which was almost non-existent. Nevertheless, ever since the revolution of 1979 was confiscated by the turban-wearers, the social force of the

<sup>25</sup> See the *Lettres de Mouvement Communiste*, n°27 and n°28, January and May 2008

<sup>26</sup> *Lettre de Mouvement Communiste*, n°27

<sup>27</sup> With a few exceptions, notably the bus drivers' union in Tehran, whose leader has been imprisoned several times.

theocratic state with a fascist vocation have never stopped eroding. The extreme dependence on oil rent has resulted in the weakening of power and its state, which is incapable of offering the country a modern capitalist way forward. As in 1979, demands for individual rights and political democracy continue to monopolise the social scene in Iran. And it cannot go otherwise if we remember the huge pressure exercised by the world market and by the competitive movement of capital on the forms of political and social domination and the specific modes of production incapable of resisting it.

But, as always, if the process of capital accumulation is the most formidable means of dissolving both the less efficient capitalist states, with the fractions of capital unable to follow the global rhythm of valorisation, and the residues of older modes of production, it is not automatically their gravedigger. This is even more true when, in certain conditions, some modern capitalist states, some advanced segments of world capital, can better serve their own specific interests by accommodating, even explicitly supporting, this state or those individual capitals threatened by the dynamic of the world market. Bourgeois ideologues call this geopolitics, or diplomacy.

This is why, despite having a political calling intrinsically in contradiction with them, the world proletariat regularly finds itself confronted with a resurgence of demands for bourgeois political democracy and individual rights. These demands are often put forward by large sectors of civil society on the periphery of capital, dominated by dictatorial, theocratic and rentier states.

Fortunately, the proletariat has accumulated an enormous experience on this terrain through the centuries. The lessons of the revolutionary wave of 1848, of the Paris Commune, of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and others attempted and crushed, tell us that these demands are not to be feared by the insurgent working class. On the contrary, they can feed the general revolt and lead other social forces towards the camp of the proletariat, but only on the condition that the proletariat expresses and affirms above all its own independent politics of the supersession of the capitalist system and the progressive revolutionary destruction of the state.

Detaching demands for democracy and individual rights from the ideology which best represents them, modern liberalism, is also an imperative which the independent working class cannot avoid, under pain of having to scale down its own revolutionary plans.

This means that a bitter political and theoretical battle must be waged within the radical democratic movements with the aim that they dissolve themselves into the more coherent and more profound one of the communist transformation of society. The dissolution of these movements cannot therefore be brought about by the pure and simple removal of the demands for individual liberties which they put forward. Communism in movement is the long process of socialisation of relations between people who are free to choose their individual destiny. Thus, individual freedom of choice, when it is not founded on the exploitation and oppression of others, is the condition for the full flowering of social relations, for the social being of man. The fullest individual freedoms, the greatest expression of collective will, socialisation of the means of production, destruction of the state and the supersession of capitalism are so many factors in the same equation. This equation will find its historic solution in the years or decades to come in China.

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