

Iran and the Left: A Dissenting View

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Global Research Note

This article initially published by Counterpunch suggests that the Iran government responding to both internal and external pressures has adopted “strong economic medicine” including hikes in the prices of basic food staples and fuel, which have served to impoverish the population. Needless to say these neoliberal macro-economic reforms create social conditions which trigger protest movements.

The author raises the issue that several recent articles on Iran (published by the independent media including Global Research) have unduly focussed on the role of foreign interference while failing to recognize that the protests are directed against a government (dominated by a “mercantile-cleric alliance”) which has applied its own neoliberal economic policy agenda (under advice from the “Washington Consensus”).

In this regard, it should be understood that “foreign intervention” invariably feeds on a pre-existing economic and social context, often created by neoliberal economic policy measures as well as economic sanctions, the objective of which is ultimately to topple the government (i.e. “regime change”).

In the case of Iran, the elimination of subsidies on essential food commodities and fuel (recommended by the World Bank) also constitutes a form of foreign interference which in many countries (e.g Brazil, Argentina) precedes the so-called “regime change”.

As the author Reza Fiyuzat points out:” International finance is clearly only too happy to see Iranian government impoverish its own population, to the benefit of international financiers.”

We should however caution that the protests directed against the Iranian government’s economic reforms are not in any way comparable to the so-called “uprising” in Syria which from the outset in March 2011 was the result of an armed terrorist insurgency integrated by Al Qaeda affiliated entities supported covertly by the US and its allies including Israel.

The protests in Iran are by no means spontaneous. They have been carefully organized. And there are clear indications of foreign involvement.

M. Ch. GR Editor

Starting on Thursday, December 28, spontaneous demonstrations broke out in different towns and cities across Iran. The protests broke out over economic issues such as high

inflation and high youth unemployment, with the trigger being the sudden hike in the price of eggs and chicken. The protesters, however, soon took up more politically oriented slogans, attacking the leaders of the regime with slogans such as, "People are begging and Mullahs rule like they're gods!"

Regardless of how long these protests last and what the outcomes may be, these protests have proven once again that the Iranian regime is fundamentally incapable of addressing people's most basic social and economic needs, and that is why for forty years it has depended on brute force to control the population. But, rule by brute force alone cannot last forever.

Deep-structure poverty has once again pushed the population over the edge. This uprising did not just happen out of the blue, though; it is the culmination of many smaller and more localized protests over a variety of social issues that have sent people to the streets in the past year.

But, first let's see what has pushed people in Iran to take to the street once again, on a mass scale, across the country, in big cities just as in small towns; towns that most western readers have never heard of, nor will ever remember.

Here is a revealing fact from a World Bank study for 2016:

"The Iranian government has implemented a major reform of its subsidy program on key staples such as petroleum products, water, electricity and bread, which has resulted in a moderate improvement in the efficiency of expenditures and economic activities."

In plain English, "efficiency of expenditures" means the Iranian government is cutting down on how much its social welfare programs actually provide social welfare.

The report continues,

"The overall indirect subsidies, which were estimated to be equivalent to 27 percent of GDP in 2007/2008 (approximately US\$77.2 billion), have been replaced by a direct cash transfer program to Iranian households. The second phase of the subsidy reform plan began in Spring 2014 which involves a more gradual fuel price adjustment than previously envisaged and the greater targeting of cash transfers to low-income households. Around 3 million high-income households have already been removed from the cash transfer recipient list. As a result, the expenditures of the Targeted Subsidies Organization (TSO) is estimated to have declined to 3.4 percent of GDP in 2016 from 4.2 percent in 2014." (1)

International finance is clearly only too happy to see Iranian government impoverish its own population, to the benefit of international financiers. An A-plus for Iranian government's efforts to cut the helping hand it gives to the neediest Iranians, reducing such help from 27% of GDP in 2008 all the way down to 3% by 2016.

In other words, Iran follows an extreme neoliberal, shock-and-awe kind of capitalism.

Official figures for poverty in Iran are not reliable, but occasionally some reports are

produced that can shed some light on the extreme levels of poverty suffered by the people. One report puts the figures for urban poverty at between 44% and 55%. The report “was published at a conference organized by Tehran University and the United Nations Population Fund and made public by the Islamic Students News Agency shortly thereafter,” according to Borgen magazine (2).



Parviz Fattah (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Things are so bleak that even regime’s top figures occasionally let slip the depth of the problem. In September of 2017, the head of Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, Parviz Fattah, said (3) (link in Persian) that between 10 to 12 million Iranians live in absolute poverty. That is just the figure for abject poverty. The total number of those who live around or under the poverty level is obviously a lot higher, reaching 40% of households according to some reports.

A telling figure is the following: Iranian government’s own estimate for a minimum necessary income is about \$1,000 per month for a family of three to four. Despite this figure, the government’s announced minimum monthly wage for workers has been set at about a third of that figure!

Coupled with increases in austerity measures are high unemployment levels as well as inflation figures in double digits (at least 15% inflation on average, according to most conservative figures, and in some months or years, or in product-specific markets by as much as 30-40%). Youth unemployment is also at high levels, with some reports estimating that in 2017 youth unemployment reached just above 30% (4). With such high unemployment rates and high inflation, and in view of the fact that for the past ten years government assistance to the needy has steadily dropped, it is not shocking that the initial trigger for the protests in Mashhad were over a 40% rise in the price (in just a few days) of eggs and chicken. That was on top of an inflation and poverty trend that has been ceaseless for the past four decades. “Enough is enough!” people are saying.

The reader must understand that most of the non-state part of the economy in Iran is based

in the bazaar, the merchant class. Not industrial-productive capital, but merchant capital has been dominating the non-state and non-oil sector since the onset of the rule of theocracy. When the merchant class is the hegemonic economic bloc, that means most capital accumulation occurs through buying and selling, not through producing commodities. As a result of this, more and more products are imported (under full state monopoly) for as cheaply as possible and sold at profits that can come faster than if the production process were to take place internally with all its related costs and complications; including, most importantly, labor conflicts and class struggle at the point of production that such capitalist ventures would have to deal with.

The reader must also consider the population growth in Iran. In 1979, at the time of the revolution, Iran's population was about 35 million. Today's population is nearly 80 million. Simultaneously, the proportion of rural-to-urban population has reversed. In 1979, almost two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, whereas now three-quarters of the population lives in urban areas. This huge mass movement to the cities is partly responsible for the urban poverty levels. Other factors include the mercantile nature of the dominant capitalist class, which is incapable of creating enough employment; state policies that prioritize spending on security forces and military expenditures abroad; and corruption.

In a country with such a highly oppressive state formation as in Iran, class struggle is too intense to render dependence on industrial production the main source of capital accumulation. Hence, the international capital's reluctance to invest in industrial production in Iran, even after the lifting of the sanctions in the wake of the nuclear deal reached between Iran and the western powers. So, not only are the local capitalists unwilling to invest in productive capacities in any meaningful magnitude, Rouhani government's nuclear deal with the western powers has not succeeded in attracting any direct foreign investments either.

A basic feature of a rentier state, such as the one in Iran, is that, depending on the character of the state, different layers and echelons of the economically powerful attach themselves to the state. During the Pahlavi dynasty, the state attracted the industrial capitalists, at the expense of the mercantile classes, who were more attached to the clerical classes. The founding father of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, is known in Iranian history as being particularly harsh on the religious establishment. (His most egregious sin against the religious establishment was the forceful banning of hijab for women.)

So, the fact that here and there we have heard slogans in support of Reza Shah does not shock me. People go by what they know from their own history. If people see that the ruling mullahs are the most corrupt, the most thuggish, the most brutal, the most miserly when it comes to helping the neediest, and the most lascivious when it comes to sexual matters while prescribing piousness to others — in short, when you are ruled by the most oppressive and violently corrupt bunch of people, and you know from your history that back a hundred years ago, Reza Shah was showing the clerical classes the door, well, you can't be blamed for thinking that that guy, Reza Shah, had figured out something about the mullahs that Iranians should have paid more attention to.

All these historical and economic conditions are framed by a state formation that allows for no dissent, no independent labor unions, no criticism from the people of anybody in the officialdom, a state formation that considers women as half worth men, a state formation that insists it is indeed ruling on behalf of an absent Imam, the Twelfth Imam of a particular Shiite sect, Imam Mehdi the Absent, and by virtue of that, this regime claims to be ruling

over Iran on behalf of God. Any criticism of the religious leaders is an affront to God, and is an actual crime in our country's criminal code: any protest against the government can be labeled, "Mohaarebeh baa Khoda", literally meaning, battling against God.

So, if the system is so oppressive that it does not allow for any legal way of petitioning the state for grievances, what are you supposed to do? Commit suicide so as not to inconvenience the state? Would any western reader do that? Then why does it seem so outrageous that the people in Iran would take to the streets?

All the varied social pressures listed above have produced almost constant social unrest and protests throughout the past year alone. In 2017, we saw the mass hunger strike of political prisoners (5), protests over extreme environmental pollution (6), intensified labor protests (7), and Kurdish protests over the killing of border porters who carry goods across the border on their back (8).

As has been its folly, the "anti-imperialists" of the western left wasted no time siding with the theocracy; once again. Global Research, for example, has cast doubt on the integrity of the uprising by labeling it another "Color Revolution". Moon of Alabama, likewise lost no time disparaging the demonstrations, sounding almost like Iranian regime propagandists. For these so-called leftists, the Iranian people are a bunch of mindless robots remote-controlled from Langley.

Of course, those who didn't understand how the Syrian uprising started are not going to understand why people in Iran are so outraged either.

Some have pointed to particular slogans raised by the people to tarnish the Iranian people's intentions.

One slogan they single out is: "Not Gaza, Not Lebanon; I give my life for Iran!" The "anti-imperialists" point to this slogan as proof of Iranian people's lack of "internationalism". In their haste to reach already-cooked up conclusions, they miss deeper insights packed in that slogan. This slogan is a negation and a street critique of the regime's rhetoric about its supposed support for the Palestinian and the Lebanese masses, whereas in reality all the Iranian regime has ever done is to use the miserable social conditions in Palestine and Lebanon to advance its own expansionist designs in the region.

In that slogan people are saying to the regime: "We see through your deceit and we are not fooled! You want us to go fight your foreign wars, but we will bring the fight to you here at home." This is similar to what anti-war activists in the U.S. would say back during the U.S. invasion of Vietnam for example. So, in fact, this slogan is a shout of solidarity with Palestinian and Lebanese masses.

People in Iran are sending a message to the Palestinian and Lebanese masses that they, the Iranian people, are working to remove one layer of oppression from the backs of Palestinian and Lebanese people, who are being used by the opportunistic and expansionist designs of the Iranian regime: a regime that has done nothing for the Arab masses other than to slaughter their Sunni brothers and sisters en masse, in tens of thousands at a time, using its sectarian Shiite militia forces, which the Iranian regime has unleashed on the peoples of Iraq and Syria.



Source: [VOA News](#)

It is incredible how quick and easy it is for some in the western left, as soon as a movement arises in some forsaken third world country, to display the knee-jerk reaction of playing judge and jury, or worse, playing self-assigned professors grading freshman essays, with the red pen at the ready to mark the slightest instance of a comma splice, word choice error or any slips in the use of transitions; all the while, completely ignoring the communicative content of the paper.

The communicative content of the uprising of the Iranian people is very simple: People want basic rights, and they want the state to stop incinerating national riches to mass slaughter people in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere; instead, Iranians want their national resources to be spent on providing for the people in Iran who live in abject poverty. Is that not something people in the U.S. would also protest for?

People in Iran are taking matters into their own hands. Can western leftists criticizing our people do the same for their societies, instead of giving pass/fail grades on how Iranian people determine their history? Can these western false socialists even organize a few hundred people to clear the trash from empty neighborhood lots to start community gardens, so that the communities that are struggling would have food security so that they are better able to put up a struggle? Can they organize a soup kitchen in a needy neighborhood in their town?

But, when people in Iran take to the streets, knowing that the consequences of their protest actions could include arrest, torture and death, these same so-called socialists, instead of expressing solidarity, look for any and all manner of shortcomings exhibited by the newly born movement, just so they can relieve themselves of any responsibility of performing any action in support of people rising up. Shame! Shame! Shame!

The Iranian youth who have risen up to say "Enough is enough!" are the children of a revolution that was hanged, drawn and quartered by a most violent yet well-organized counterrevolution. This younger generation is seeing their lives and prospects for a decent future and their integrity stolen, and they are standing up to this historical theft by the most parasitic layer of our society: the mullahs. The clergy is the most unproductive leeches of our society, yet their sons, in upper-class neighborhoods of Tehran and other big cities, own more Bugatti's and Lamborghini's per capita than you'd see in the streets Monaco. Where

did all that wealth come from? It was all stolen from our national coffers, and the youth of our country have risen up to stop the thievery.

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Notes

- 1) <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview>
- 2) <http://www.borgenmagazine.com/poverty-iran-rise/>
- 3) <https://www.isna.ir/news/96062614418/رئیس-کمیته-امداد-امام-ره-10-تا-12-میلیون-ایرانی-در-فقر-مطلق>
- 4) <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/youth-unemployment-rate>
- 5) <https://www.amnesty.ie/iran-mass-hunger-strike-political-prisoners-protest-inhumane-conditions/>
- 6) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/protests-irans-khuzestan-province-worries-political-establishment-1372971047>
- 7) <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/articles/spike-in-labor-protests-in-iran-is-changing-the-political-milieu/>
- 8) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/07092017>

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