

Iran: Protests wane as conflict within regime continues

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The protest movement generated by charges of vote-rigging made by Mir Hossein Mousavi and other losing candidates in Iran's June 12 election largely disappeared from the streets Monday, but the internal struggle within the Iranian regime continued.

Less than 1,000 protesters turned out at Tehran's central Haft-e Tir Square and were quickly dispersed by riot police using tear gas and truncheons. "There were signs that the protesters' enthusiasm was tapering off," the Los Angeles Times reported from Tehran. "Police dragged off a young man in a green shirt, the official color of the Mousavi campaign, without raising the hackles from pedestrians that erupted during similar encounters in previous days."

The relative calm in the Iranian capital was enforced by heavy deployments of police in all of Tehran's main downtown squares. No protests were reported Sunday, amid a similar police mobilization.

The state media has reported that 13 people were killed and 20 others wounded during a demonstration held Saturday, the day after Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivered a sermon to a mass audience at Tehran University. Khamenei called for an end to the street protests and acceptance of the election, in which the official tally gave the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 63 percent of the vote compared to 34 percent for Mousavi.

The political opposition said that the killings were carried out by security forces, including the Basij militia. The government blamed the deaths on "armed terrorists" and accused Western governments and media of fomenting violence.

Police arrested at least 457 people during the Saturday demonstration, according to the government-run media. A spokesman for the Iranian judiciary said on state television Monday that special courts will be created to try those arrested at the protests.

In an admission that provoked another wave of electoral fraud charges in the Western media, the Guardian Council, the legislative body charged by the government with investigating the election, reported Monday, "Votes collected in 50 cities surpass the number of people eligible to cast ballots in those areas." It estimated that three million ballots—out of 40 million cast—were involved.

A spokesman for the council disputed charges that the over-vote amounts to clear evidence of fraud, attributing it instead to people, including migrant workers, voting outside of their home districts, which is allowed under Iranian election laws. It added that the votes would

not have changed the result of the election in any case, given the scale of Ahmadinejad's landslide.

The Interior Ministry announced that it would release "box-by-box" breakdowns of the vote in an attempt to dispel "ambiguities," the state-run Press TV reported.

Mousavi's call for a new election based on charges of fraud—picked up and amplified by the US and European media—was the principal demand of last week's mass protests, which were confined largely to urban middle-class and more privileged layers attracted to the opposition candidate's promise of "reform."

The content of this "reform," aside from vague promises of greater personal liberties, consists of reducing friction between Tehran and Washington, opening up Iran further to foreign capital, instituting a faster pace of privatization of state-owned industries, and a halt to the limited social assistance programs that Ahmadinejad has used to secure the regime a popular base.

Mousavi is himself a longtime senior official in the regime and an unlikely reformer. During the 1980s, as prime minister for nearly the entire decade, he presided over the brutal repression of left-wing and other dissident elements, as well as the prosecution of the Iran-Iraq war in which hundreds of thousands lost their lives.

Behind Mousavi stands Iran's billionaire ex-president, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who lost the 2005 Iranian election to Ahmadinejad. In a profile of Rafsanjani published Monday, the New York Times described the ex-president as someone who "supports greater opening to the West, privatizing parts of the economy and granting more power to civil elected institutions." The newspaper compared this agenda favorably to the current regime, which it said "has done little to modernize the stagnant economy."

This preference is based on the conception that a victory for the "reformers" would facilitate Iranian support for the US wars on the country's borders in Iraq and Afghanistan and open up the country to US capital.

This is what explains the major operation mounted by the American media—with the Times in the lead—to portray the Iranian election as fraudulent from the moment that the polls closed. Behind the media's enthusiasm for the "green revolution" in Iran stands the US government and its intelligence agencies, which have attempted to maintain a low profile while allowing the subservient press to propagandize in support of Washington's line on the election.

The aim of the US is not to overthrow the Islamic Republic nor to foster a flowering of democracy, but rather to effect a change at the top of the regime that would favor American interests. While promoting the anti-Ahmadinejad faction of the clerical establishment, very much in the pattern of the so-called "color revolutions" through which Washington engineered the installation of pro-US regimes in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, the US has no interest in seeing the events in Iran spark a broader movement that would involve the Iranian working class.

President Obama has continued to defend his position that the US should "not be seen as meddling" in Iranian affairs, even as his government pursues a policy in the region that is every bit as predatory as that of Bush.

Obama said nothing on the Iranian events on Sunday and Monday. A White House spokesman Monday said that the president had “been moved by what we’ve seen on television” and had “concerns and questions” about the election results. A White House press conference has been announced for Tuesday afternoon in which Obama is expected to speak on Iran.

Republicans have criticized Obama for failing to make covert American operations in Iran more overt by openly declaring US support for Mousavi. Among those making this case on Sunday was former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, one of the principal architects of the war against Iraq. He told CNN that the Mousavi-led opposition had “made it clear they want support from the world” and that Obama should “find out if he (Mousavi) wants a conversation.”

However, the US-backed effort to promote the “reformers” has apparently stalled. While the ex-president Rafsanjani remains the head of the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body that has the power to appoint or remove Iran’s supreme leader, that assembly has indicated support for Khamenei, with 50 of its 86 members issuing a statement charging that “enemies of Iran” were directing “unrest and riots” in response to the election results. On Saturday, the body declared its “strong support” for Khamenei’s speech the day before calling for acceptance of the vote and an end to the protests.

In what was widely viewed as a warning to Rafsanjani, police arrested his eldest daughter, Faezeh Hashemi, who addressed demonstrators Saturday, and four other family members. All five were released within several hours, but their arrests were reported prominently in the Iranian media.

Rafsanjani is widely resented for his immense wealth, and his family members have been charged with enriching themselves through insider deals. This has generated demands that they be placed on trial for corruption.

Mousavi himself has not been seen in public for several days. While his web site posted a statement declaring to Iranians that “protesting against lies is your right,” it also cautioned protesters to “avoid violence” and referred to the Basij militia, which has been blamed for violent attacks on the protests, as “our brothers” and “protectors of our revolution and regime.”

There were also indications that some of his supporters within the political establishment have backed off. “Nothing is certain now,” said Hassan Baghernejad, a senior Mousavi campaign official, according to the Washington Post. “Some people have accepted the definitive response by the supreme leader; others haven’t. We must wait and see.”

Even as the protests waned, there were reports that two major Iranian unions had condemned the regime’s repression of the demonstrators. The union representing auto workers at the Khodro plant in Tehran, which carried out a major strike last year, announced a symbolic job action.

The union declared, “We the workers of Iran Khodro...in each working shift will stop working for half an hour to protest the suppression of students, workers, women and the Constitution and declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran.”

Similarly, the Bus Workers Union of Iran issued a statement declaring that it “places itself

alongside all those who are offering themselves in the struggle to build a free and independent civic society." The statement condemned "suppression and threats" and called for the recognition of "labor union and social rights."

No doubt, one of the primary concerns within both of the competing factions is that fissures at the top could create the conditions for the independent intervention of the masses, and that the protests of the relatively privileged in support of Mousavi could be replaced by a movement of the working class against unemployment and inflation directed against the regime as a whole.

It is precisely such an independent movement of Iranian workers that is required to conduct a genuine struggle for democratic rights and social equality. The bitter lessons of Iranian history—from the CIA-backed overthrow of Prime Minister Mossedeq in 1953 to the fate of the 1979 revolution—have demonstrated that the working class cannot achieve any of its aims by aligning itself with one or another faction of the bourgeoisie. Subordinating workers' struggles to supposedly "progressive" factions of the ruling elite can lead only to new defeats.

The most urgent task is the building of an independent party of the Iranian working class that advances its own, socialist program, to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, organizing popular assemblies to carry out this fight.

This program can be carried forward only by uniting the Iranian working class with workers throughout the Middle East and internationally in a common struggle to put an end to capitalism. An Iranian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be constructed to carry out this historic task.

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