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Iran

The Tragedy of the Left's Discourse on Iran

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The electoral coup and the subsequent uprising and suppression of the revolting voters in Iran have prompted all sorts of analyses in Western media from both the Right and the Left. The Right, mostly inspired by the neo-con ideology and reactionary perspectives, dreams of the re-creation of the Shah's Iran, looks for pro-American/pro-Israeli allies among the disgruntled Iranian public, and seeks an Eastern European type velvet revolution.

[James Petras] As there is very little substance to these analyses, they are hardly worth much critical review; and one cannot expect them to try to understand the complexities of Iranian politics and society.

As for the Left in the West, confusions abound. The progressive left, from the beginning openly supported the Iranian civil society movement. Znet, Campaign for Peace and democracy, Bullet, and some other media provided sound analysis to help others understand the complexities of the Iranian situation (see for example, <http://www.zcommunications.org/znet/viewArticle/21919>). Some intellectuals signed petitions along with their Iranian counterparts, while others chose to remain silent. But disturbingly, like in the situations in Gaza or Lebanon, where Hamas and Hezbollah uncritically became champions of anti-imperialism, for some other people on the left, Ahmadinejad has become a champion because of his seemingly firm rhetoric against Israel and the US. Based on a crude class analysis, he is also directly or indirectly praised by some for his supposed campaign against the rich and imagined support of the working poor. These analyses also undermine the genuine movement within the vibrant Iranian civil society, and denigrate their demands for democracy, and political and individual freedoms as middle class concerns, instigated by western propaganda (a view shared by Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and his supporters).

MRZine and Islamists

The most bizarre case is the on-line journal MRZine, the offshoot of Monthly Review, which in some instances even publicized the propaganda of the Basij (Islamic militia) hooligans and criminals (<http://www.presstv.irdetail.aspx?id=98984§ionid=351020101>). The website has given ample rooms to pro-Islamist contributors; while they can hardly be considered to be on the left, their words are appreciated by the leftists editing the site. One writer claims that the battle in Iran is about "welfare reform and private property rights", and that Ahmadinejad "has enraged the managerial class", as he is "the least enthusiastic about neo-liberal reforms demanded by Iran's corporate interests", and that he is under attack by "Iran's fiscal conservative candidates" (<http://mrZine.monthlyreview.org/pourzal270609.html>). The author conveniently fails to mention that there are also much "corporate interests" controlled by Ahmadinejad's friends and allies in the Islamic Guards and his conservative cleric supporters, and that he has staunchly followed "privatization" policies by handing over state holdings to his cronies.

During the 1979 revolution, the late Tudeh Party, under the direction of the Soviet Union, was unsuccessfully digging deep and looking hard for "non-capitalists" among the Islamic regime's elements to follow a "non-capitalist path" and a "socialist orientation". Now it seems that MRZine magazine is beginning a new excavation for such a breed among Islamists, not understanding that all factions of the Islamic regime have always been staunch capitalists.

Azmi Bishara's imagined Iran

In "Iran: An Alternative Reading" (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/953/op1.htm>, reproduced in MRZine), Azmi Bishara argues that Iran's totalitarian system of government differs from other totalitarian systems in two definitive ways: Firstly, it has incorporated "such a high degree [of] constitutionally codified democratic competition in the ruling order and its ideology". Bishara does not explain however that these "competitions" are just for the insider Islamists, and all others, including moderate Muslims or the wide spectrum of secular liberals and the left are excluded by the anti-democratic institutions within the regime.

The Second differentiation Bishara makes is that "... the official ideology that permeates institutions of government ... is a real religion embraced by the vast majority of the people". He is right if he means the majority of Iranians are Muslim and Shi'i, but it is wrong to assume that all are religious and share the same obscurantist fundamentalist version as those in power. He also fails to recognize the existence of a large number of secular people in Iran, one of the highest percentages among Muslim-majority countries.

He praises "such tolerance of political diversity", "tolerance of criticism", and "peaceful rotation of authority" in Iran. One wonders if our prominent Palestinian politician is writing about an imaginary Iran, or the real one. Could it be that Bishara has not heard of the massacres of thousands of political prisoners, chain killings of intellectuals, and silencing of the most able and progressive voices in the country? Doesn't he know that a non-elected 12-member conservative body (The Guardianship Council) only allows a few trusted individuals to run for President or the Parliament, and that the real 'authority', the Supreme Leader, does not rotate, and is selected by an all-Mullah Assembly of Experts for life? The unelected Leader leads the suppressive apparatuses of the state, and since 1993 has created his own "Special Guards of Velayat" (NOPO) for quick suppressive operations. So much for tolerance and democracy.

Bishara undermines the genuine massive reform movement and claims that "expectations regarding the power of the reform trend ... were created by Western and non-Western media opposed to Ahmadinejad...". Had Bishara done his homework, he would have learned about the massive campaigns led by large number of womens' organizations, the youth, teachers and select groups of workers. He warns us of "elitism" and "arrogant classist edge", and implicitly dismisses these movements of "middle class backgrounds" and claims that "these people are not the majority of young people but rather the majority of young people from a particular class". It is unclear on what basis he makes the assertion that most of the youth from poor sectors of the society support Ahmadinejad.

James Petras message: freedom is not "vital"!

One of the most shocking pieces is by the renowned controversial Left writer and academic, James Petras. In his piece "Iranian Elections: 'The Stolen Elections' Hoax" (<http://www.globalreach.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=14018>), Petras conclusively denies any wrongdoings in the Iranian elections and confidently goes into the detail of the demographics of some small Iranian towns, with no credibility or expertise in the subject.

The abundant facts pointing to massive electoral fraud speak for themselves, so I will not waste time refuting his evidence and 'sources', but will rather focus on his analysis. The most stunning aspect of the Petras piece is the total absence of any sympathy for all the brave women, youth, teachers, civil servants and workers who have been so vigorously campaigning for democracy, human rights, and political freedoms, risking their lives by spontaneously pouring into the streets when they realized they were cheated. Instead we see sporadic references to "comfortable upper class enclave", "well-dressed and fluent in English" youth, etc. Women are not mentioned even once, nor is there any recognition of their amazing struggle against the most obscurantist policies such as stoning, polygamy, and legal gender discriminations. Neither is there any reference to trade union activists, writers, and artists, many of whom are in jail.

Instead, the emphasis is on crude class analysis: "[t]he demography of voting reveals a real class polarization pitting high income, free market oriented capitalist individuals against working class, low income, community based supporters of a 'moral economy' in which usury and profiteering are limited by religious precepts." Petras could not be more misguided and misleading. Of course this would fit well within the perceived traditional class conflict paradigm (with an added touch of imagined Islamic economics!). However, the reality is far more complex. The Ayatollahs on both sides are "market-oriented capitalists", so are the leaders of the Islamic Guard, who run industries, control trade monopolies, and are major land developers. There are also workers on both sides. Failed economic policies, the rising 30% inflation rate, growing unemployment and the suppression of trade unions turned many workers against Ahmadinejad. The communiqués of Workers of Iran Khodrow (auto industry) against the government's heavy-handed tactics, the long strikes and confrontations of the workers of Tehran Public Transport and the participation of workers in the post-election revolts, are all examples of opposition to Ahmadinejad by workers. It would also be simplistic to talk of the Islamists 'moral economy', when both sides have been involved in embezzlement and corruption, much of which was exposed during the debates fiasco in which they exposed each other.

On the basis of his limited understanding of the situation, Petras declares that "[t]he scale of the opposition's electoral deficit should tell us how out of touch it is with its own people's vital concerns." Firstly, like many others he cannot distinguish among different groups and categories of this "opposition", and worse, is telling Iranian women, youth, union activists, intellectuals and artists, that their demands and "concerns" for political and individual freedoms, human rights, democracy, gender equity and labour rights are not "vital". It seems he's telling the Iranian left: rofagha (comrades), if you are being tortured and rotting in prisons, your books are burned and you are expelled from your profession, don't worry, because the "working class" is receiving subsidies and handouts from the government! Professor Petras and those like him will not be as forgiving if their own freedoms and privileges were at issue.

The left has historically been rooted in solidarity with progressive movements, women's rights and rights for unions and its voice has been first and foremost a call for freedom. The voices that we hear today from part of the Left are tragically reactionary. Siding with religious fundamentalists with the wrong assumptions that they are anti-imperialists and anti-capitalists, is aligning with the most reactionary forces of history. This is a reactionary left, different from progressive left which has always been on the side of the forces of progress.

Å½iÅ¾ek also misses an important point

In a much admired and distributed piece, Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ek, the prominent voice of the new left, refers to versions of events in Iran. (<http://itself.wordpress.com/2009/06/24/will-the-cat-above-the-precipice-fall-down/>). Å½iÅ¾ek explains that "Moussavi supporters... see their activity as the repetition of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, as the return to its roots, the undoing of the revolution's later corruption." He adds "[w]e are dealing with a genuine popular uprising of the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution", "'the return of the repressed' of the Khomeini revolution".

Å½iÅ¾ek does not differentiate between the "partisans of Khomeini" during the 1979 revolution, and the non-religious, secular elements, both liberals and Left, who actually started the revolution and in the absence of other alternatives, accepted Khomeini's leadership. Lack of recognition of this reality, that sometimes draws us to despair, is a big mistake. Along the same line, Å½iÅ¾ek, wrongly attributes all of today's movement to support for Moussavi: "Moussavi ... stands for the genuine resuscitation of the popular dream which sustained the Khomeini revolution." On this basis he concludes that "the 1979 Khomeini revolution cannot be reduced to a hard line Islamist takeover." To substantiate his point, Å½iÅ¾ek refers to the "incredible effervescence of the first year of the revolution...". In fact much of the 'effervescence' of the first year, or before the hostage taking at the American Embassy, was because of the actions of the non-partisans of Khomeini; from the workers councils movement, to confrontations of Fedais and other left organizations in Kurdistan and in Gonbad, to the women's and university-based movements. It

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was a period when Khomeini and his supporters had not consolidated their power. After the hostage crisis and beginning of the Iran-Iraq war "the Islam establishment" took over.

All these draws $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ ek to conclude that "what this means is that there is genuine liberating potential in Islam." $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ ek does not recognize that Moussavi is a conservative Islamist, and this "liberating potential" can hardly be applied to him. For sure, there exists a new breed of Muslim intellectuals, the likes of Mohamad Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, Reza Alijani, and Hassan Eshkevari, who believe in the separation of religion and state, and can be the champions of such liberating potentials, but definitely not the likes of Khomeini and Moussavi.

There is no doubt that the Iranian 1979 revolution is an unfinished business and its main demands for democracy and political freedoms, and social equity have remained unfulfilled. But these were not Khomeini's demands, in the same manner that not all today's demands are those of Moussavi.

What is happening in Iran is a spontaneous, ingenious and independent revolt by a people frustrated with thirty years of obscurantist tyrannical religious rule, triggered by electoral fraud but rooted in more substantial demands. Much to the dismay of the clerical regime and their supporters inside and outside the country, the ever expanding Iranian civil society brilliantly seized the moment of the election to take strong steps forward. They have no illusions about the Islamist regime, or about their own capabilities. Their strategy is to gradually and non-violently replace the Islamic regime and its hegemony with a secular democratic one. This is a hugely significant, delicate and protracted confrontation. It is essential that they get the wide-ranging effective support from the left in the West so that they don't fall prey to the misleading conception of the left not having concerns for democracy and civil liberties.

This article appeared earlier at [ZNet](#).