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Iran

Where is the Islamic Republic going?

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What is happening in Iran is a spontaneous, ingenious and independent revolt by a people frustrated by thirty years of tyranny by an obscurantist, religious regime, a revolt that was unleashed by electoral fraud.

The present situation is only the result of a long and complex process which has been taking place inside the regime, a deep crisis, located on the one hand at the summit of the governing circles and within the ruling class, and on the other hand within Iranian society. This conjuncture has opened up a space for an authentic mass movement to replace the Islamic regime by a secular, democratic, social and modern republic.

The character of the movement

Apart from a section of the faction in power, a few cynics and partisans of conspiracy theories, to which some confused leftist groups and personalities have unfortunately been attracted, nobody doubts that the people of Iran, in their overwhelming majority, have strongly and clearly expressed their desire to finish with the present political system. Since the so-called "reformist" faction wasted invaluable time and missed its one occasion, it is the whole Islamic system, and not only the conservatives, which is being challenged.

In Iran nobody believes a word of the government propaganda which proclaims that the protests that followed the announcement of the results of the presidential election were organized from outside Iran. This crisis has all the aspects of a total bankruptcy of the Islamic Republic. For the last thirty years, in order to survive its crises and mask its fall, the regime has constantly invoked foreign threats, real or imaginary.

On the other hand, in the West certain left "analysts" declare that the crowds of demonstrators in the streets of Teheran and other cities come from the best-off layers of the urban middle-class and that Moussavi is their political representative. According to them Ahmadi-Nejad continues to have strong support among the overwhelming majority of the population in poor urban and rural areas. These alleged analysts know nothing about the class structure of Iranian society, nor about the nature of the Islamic Republic, nor what was at stake in this election, nor its consequences for the future of the country, nor the facts concerning the results of the election.

It seems necessary, before going into the details of what happened during the campaign, the presidential election of 2009 and the massive protests which followed it, to give an outline of Iranian society and of the regime that holds power.

The structural paradox of the political system

On the sociological level Iran is one of the best educated societies in the region: a rate of illiteracy lower than 10 per cent, more than 2.5 million students (of whom 51 per cent are women) in higher education, out of a total population of approximately 70 million which is very young (more than 60 per cent are under 30). More than 70 per cent of the population live in urban centres. This country is ruled by a dictatorial and medieval political-legal system. With the aim of regulating the private and public life of citizens, the Constitution and the various laws are governed by a rigid interpretation of Islam which in general does not leave the slightest place for democracy and makes very few concessions to women and young people.

On the political level, it is a system characterised by an unparalleled degree of dichotomy, a theocratic regime behind

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a republican mask. The author of this article has given elsewhere a detailed description of the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran [1].

In short, on one side there is a theocracy which reigns without elections and holds power in all fields:

- The Supreme Guide (the representative of God on earth, designated by the Assembly of Experts, a body composed of clerics, who have themselves been carefully chosen and elected following a complex procedure which leaves little choice to the people);
- The Council of the Guardians of the Constitution (12 clerics appointed by the Supreme Guide): this is the regime's watchdog, which supervises the conformity with Islam of the laws of the Parliament and the designation of the candidates authorised to stand for election to Parliament and to the presidency of the republic;
- The Assembly of Experts which designates the Supreme Guide;
- The Expediency Council which settles cases of litigation between the Islamic Parliament and the Council of Guardians;
- The legal system guarantees that the Islamic laws are applied; it is controlled by ultra-conservative clerics. Its head is named by the Supreme Guide, to whom he is personally responsible;
- The armed forces include the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (GIR, Pasdarans, the regime's ideological army) and the traditional armies. The main leaders of the armies and the Guardians of the Revolution are appointed by the Supreme Guide and are accountable to him alone. The Guardians of the Revolution have the role of combating those who are opposed to the Islamic revolution. They control the paramilitary militiamen (Bassiji) who operate in every town and city.

On the other side there are the elective functions: the President of the Republic and the members of the Islamic Parliament (Majlis). All the laws adopted by the Parliament must be judged compatible both with the Constitution and, especially, with Islam by the highly conservative Council of Guardians. The members of the government are appointed by the president. The Supreme Guide is very much involved in all questions related to defence, security and foreign policy.

It is clear that this system in no way resembles a Republic. We can call it a Caliphate (90 per cent) disguised as a Republic (10 per cent).

From the beginning of the Islamic revolution these two obviously contradictory aspects of the system - theocratic and elective - have often been the cause of tensions. The first president of the Republic, Bani-Sadr, was removed from office in 1981 by the Ayatollah Khomeini following major dissensions. In 1997, Khatami, an "Islamic reformist" who claimed to want to open out to civil society and to make possible a well-controlled participation of certain layers of society in the second-level political decisions of the country, was elected to the presidency. Both the Supreme Guide and the hierarchy of the Army of Pasdarans saw this as a threat to their interests. The elective dimension of the system entered into conflict with its theocratic dimension during the eight years of Khatami's presidency. The majority of the laws adopted by the Parliament dominated by the "Islamic reformists" were rejected by the Council of Guardians, dominated by the conservatives.

Since the accession to the presidency of Ahmadi-Nejad in 2005, the essential task of the tandem formed by the

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Supreme Guide and the Army of the Pasdarans (represented in the person of Ahmadi-Nejad) has aimed at neutralizing the elective dimension by attacking on three fronts simultaneously. First of all by manipulating certain key parts of the state apparatus in order to reduce their ability to act autonomously in support of the president's authority. This involved, among others, the dissolution of the Planning Organization (which allocates the budget of the State), the disorganisation of the Central Bank (which governs monetary policy) and the reorganization of the executive and administrative system of the state in order to reduce the autonomy of ministers. Other measures, no less important than the preceding ones, consisted of ensuring and consolidating the absolute hegemony of the Army of Pasdarans in the political and economic domains. Today 30 per cent of the members of Parliament, a third of the ministers, the heads of key organizations of state such as radio and television, the majority of the mayors, prefects, regional governors, etc., come from the Army of Pasdarans.

The third objective consists of gradually eliminating what remains of the elective dimension of the system so that the Islamic regime is from now on a total theocracy, an "Islamic state" without a republican dimension.

During his first term of office Ahmadi-Nejad partially succeeded in carrying out this triple project by repressing the social movements (in particular those of women, workers and non-Persian people but also the student movement, already weakened under Khatami).

At the end of his first term of office, Ahmadi-Nejad managed to curb the state apparatus and to lay the basis of the total hegemony of the ruling bloc, formed by the Supreme Guide and a faction of the Army of Pasdarans. The presidential election of 2009 was intended to complete the work of the outgoing president so as to definitively exorcize the spectre of a presidency that would be autonomous in relation to the theocracy which the Supreme Guide incarnates. But major differences existed in these new elections, which upset the plans of the duo in power, plans which were neither more nor less than a creeping coup d'état [2]. These plans consisted of having the outgoing president triumphantly elected, in order to ensure an international legitimacy for him, faced with a new American presidency, and also to provide Ahmadi-Nejad with a domestic stature in order to subdue the contestation within the elite of the regime (the pragmatist camp of Rafsanjani and the minority of the reformers). All the more so as in the eyes of the dominant faction of the regime, a victory of the "reformist" candidate Moussavi, coinciding with a new administration in the United States, threatened to reduce, although temporarily, surface tensions with America, depriving the Islamic regime of its convenient external scapegoat. That was unacceptable.

Ahmadi-Nejad is not Chavez!

Ahmadi-Nejad is a leader of the far Right who has sought, as the clergy did during the revolution in 1979, to gain the support of the masses by resorting to a nationalist, populist and third-worldist demagoguery that some left-wingers in the West, naively and sometimes stupidly, confuse with anti-imperialism and an orientation favourable to the poorest layers in society. The support of President Chavez of Venezuela is, in their eyes, the proof of it - as for the support of Moscow, Beijing and North Korea to Ahmadi-Nejad, they forget about it! However the diplomatic support of Chavez cannot be a criterion in our analysis of the government of Ahmadi-Nejad. The relation between the two countries, as two oil exporters, is determined by the search for an alliance within OPEC. A very brief comparison between the situation in Venezuela and the real conditions of the Iranian people, under the government of Ahmadi-Nejad, can clarify the profoundly different nature of these two regimes. In Venezuela, under Chavez's regime, trade-union organizations and militant workers' struggles are developing, workers can occupy abandoned companies and manage them under workers' control. In Iran on the contrary, workers have neither the right to join a union nor the right to strike - and when they defy these undemocratic laws, they are exposed to the most brutal repression.

During Ahmadi-Nejad's first term of office workers faced wholesale attacks from the capitalists and also from their government. Among these attacks, we must recall the new anti-worker labour code of Ahmadi-Nejad. Not a week goes by without protest actions such as strikes, demonstrations, meetings and sit-ins by workers, teachers, nurses,

etc. For example in 2006, when 3000 Teheran bus drivers took the initiative of organizing a trade union, the government responded by brutal repression and massive sackings. Trade union leaders were also attacked by the police - including the general secretary of the union, Mr. Ossalou. First of all they savagely tortured him and then condemned him to five years' imprisonment. He has been in prison since 2007.

After the spectacle of televised debates during the recent electoral campaign, since August 2 the regime has been putting on another spectacle. This is the opening of the trial of those whom the regime describes as "fomenters of disorders and participants in a velvet revolution", whom it accuses of being a danger to the security of the state, etc. Among the accused we again find Mr. Ossalou, in the role of an agent of imperialism, accused of having sought organize a revolution on behalf of foreign powers... from inside prison!

When, on May 1, 2007, trade-union activists tried to organize a demonstration in Santander, the police brutally repressed them. Eleven leaders were condemned to be whipped and to pay a fine. When 2000 worker activists tried to organize a demonstration on May 1 this year, in Teheran, the police savagely repressed them. 150 of them were arrested (of whom some are still in prison). Millions of Iranian workers have not received any wages for months. When they try to organize, the police repress them.

Intimidation, dismissal, arrest, imprisonment and torture of working-class activists and trade unionists are common practices in the Islamic Republic. But these attacks have accelerated under the presidency of Ahmadi-Nejad. This regime and its president are not only anti-women and anti-youth, they are above all anti-worker. In 2008 and 2009 there were days of solidarity with Iranian workers, organized by the majority of trade unions on the international level.

In Venezuela, the Chavez regime has stopped the process of privatization of state enterprises and nationalized a certain number of private companies. In Iran, on the contrary, Ahmadi-Nejad has accelerated the privatization of state enterprises. Since 2007, in less than two years, more than 400 important companies have been privatized, including telecommunications, the Mobarakeh steel-works in Ispahan, the petrochemical complex of the same city, the Kurdistan Cement Company, etc. Among them figure the majority of banks, insurance companies, oil and gas companies, etc. Ahmadi-Nejad was congratulated by the International Monetary Fund, the organization which manages the business of the world capitalist system, for the good behaviour of his government. This is unprecedented, something which was never seen before, neither under the present regime nor under the former regime of the Shah.

The balance sheet of Ahmadi-Nejad

The well programmed collapse of agricultural production obliged Iran to buy 1.18 million tons of corn in the United States between 2008 and 2009 and to import enormous quantities of sugar, equivalent to 10 years' consumption by the country. This took place whereas until recently Iran was the third sugar exporter in the world and the country was self-sufficient in corn. But it served to promote imports, which was beneficial to the mullahs engaged in the import trade.

Iran is the second oil producer in the world and possesses 10 per cent of confirmed world oil reserves. The country has also the second biggest reserves of natural gas. Having built the first and the largest refinery in the world, Iran was an exporter of petrol. Today, the lack of refineries forces the country to import 40 per cent of its internal consumption, to a value of 4 billion dollars in 2008.

Foreign direct investment in Iran attained a record 10.2 billion dollars in 2007, against 4.2 billion in 2005 and 2 million in 1994. Foreign transactions with Iran rose to 150 billion dollars between 2000 and 2007.

Twenty European countries, in particular Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, have invested more than 10.9 billion dollars in Iran. Canadian and American companies are also involved in economic projects in Iran, to a value of more than 1.4 billion dollars. Among the American companies is Halliburton, one of whose principal shareholders is Dick Cheney, the former vice-president of the USA, who claimed to want to attack Iran! Halliburton, in spite of the trade sanctions against Iran, has this year sold more than 40 million dollars' worth of equipment in the field of oil exploitation. A final example, in 2008 the amount of direct exports of the United States to Iran doubled compared to the previous year. All that took place during the first presidential term of Ahmadi-Nejad.

In the economic domain, under the presidency of Ahmadi-Nejad, the Pasdarans have reinforced their immense financial empire, which is autonomous of the government. They have taken control of sectors of production, distribution and trade. Via various foundations - their economic arms, which are legally outside of control by the government and accountable only to the Supreme Guide, without passing through legal procedures, such as invitations to tender - they obtain concessions running into billions of dollars, for the construction of pipelines but also to collect part of the revenues from Iranian oil through the company Petropars. No financially profitable field escapes them, neither drug trafficking (a market of 10 billion dollars in 2006), nor even the sex trade and prostitution networks for the petro-monarchies of the Gulf.

Last example: a few months ago, in the middle of the economic crisis of the world capitalist system, the Saipa complex, the second-biggest car manufacturer in Iran, whose majority shareholder is the Army of Pasdarans, ordered from Chrysler 55,000 cars to be assembled in Iran. The chairman of this enormous industrial complex is only 25 years old and he was appointed by Ahmadi-Nejad in person! The goal of the operation was to take part in the rescue of Chrysler launched by Georges Bush and above all to give a sign of the good behaviour of Ahmadi-Nejad's Iran.

According to official data, Iran has a level of poverty of around 21 per cent of the population, which means that 16.5 million people live under the poverty threshold. But according to a United Nations report 550,000 children exist on less than a dollar a day and 35.5 per cent of the population earn 2 dollars a day, whereas the poverty threshold is fixed at 650 dollars per month. So we reach a figure of 40 per cent and not 21 per cent. These statistics correspond to the period when the price of oil had tripled.

The economic policy of Ahmadi-Nejad during his first term of office was catastrophic: Inflation was higher than 25 per cent per annum, unemployment affected 40 per cent of the active population, we witnessed the regression of the productive system and poverty cruelly affected the most fragile layers of the population. An official study in 2006 showed that Iran numbered 3.2 million drug addicts, of whom 60 per cent were between 14 and 16 years old.

Even though the government of Ahmadi-Nejad criticizes American imperialism and the Zionist regime in Israel, with the aim of diverting the attention of the masses from domestic problems, it is not even consistent in its fight against this enemy. The agreement and the collaboration of the Iranian government for the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan are well-known facts. In Iraq, instead of supporting a unified national liberation struggle, the Iranian regime played a key role in dividing Iraqis.

Admittedly, Rafsanjani and Khatami are representatives of liberal capitalism, pro-Western and pro-imperialist, but in this race Ahmadi-Nejad and the faction of the regime which he represents are the champions and have already overtaken them. The difference between these two gangs of mafiosi is that the demagogy of one of them, in a position of weakness, takes up the language of "democracy" while the others use the demagogy of "anti-imperialism".

The Iranian spring in the midst of a medieval

winter

It is in this politically tense and economically disastrous context that the Iranian population had to take part in the joke that the Islamic regime calls “presidential election”. The term “election” appears inappropriate insofar as the candidates are selected in advance by a council which gives an opinion on the level of their competences and their religious virtues.

The main role of these elections is to legitimate the unelected structures which hold power. Consequently at each election, the regime makes frantic efforts to have a maximum of ballot papers in the ballot boxes. This is a key point for understanding the significance of the electoral coup d'état orchestrated by Ahmadi-Nejad and the Supreme Guide.

The elections allowed the various factions of the clergy and the inner circle of the regime to examine the legitimacy of their solutions, by reinforcing their weight in the hierarchy thanks to the electoral results. Consequently, whereas the elections were by no means democratic for the population, they allowed great freedom for the whole of the clergy in power. What it comes down to in fact is a form of internal democracy within the ruling class [3].

Given the ferocity of the repression, the people of Iran, deprived of the right of expression, use the competition between the factions to manoeuvre and obtain a certain respite. They have done this alternatively by voting or by boycotting the elections. There was a massive turn-out to elect Khatami in 1997 (his rival being the official candidate of the regime, it was de facto a referendum against the regime), and a massive boycott of the Majlis elections in 2004 (when almost all the reformist candidates were rejected).

In this election Ahmadi-Nejad, in alliance with a section of the GIR and a handful of mullahs, essentially wanted to deprive the clergy of its power to use the elections as an instrument to increase the power base of its particular factions within the regime. This did not come out of nowhere. Elections had been systematically organized in the course of the last 15 years, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, to take or not take control of all the organs of state, elective or not. In parallel the military-security apparatus became an important economic force in the country.

Among 475 possible candidates to the presidency of the Republic only four were selected by the Council of Guardians: Moussavi, former Prime Minister (between 1981 and 1988), candidate of the reformers; Ahmadi-Nejad, President in office who sought to obtain a second term; Karroubi, former president of the Islamic Parliament; Rezaii, former commander of the Pasdarans. Ahmadi-Nejad and Moussavi each represented a faction of the regime and the other two had walk-on parts in the big show.

The “reformist” candidate Moussavi is no better than his adversaries. He was Prime Minister in the 1980s, at the time of the massacre of 30,000 left activists. All of a sudden, he has discovered that the Islamic Republic - to which he is not opposed, fundamentally - needs to be “reformed”, i.e. to undergo some minor changes, so that everything may remain as it was before. The opposition between Ahmadi-Nejad and Moussavi is the opposition between two factions of a reactionary regime who are envisaging opposed strategies to save the present regime: one wants to make reforms at the top in order to avoid a revolution from below; the other fears that reforms at the top may unleash a revolution from below.

In order to better understand the strategy of the regime for the 2009 elections it is necessary to stress that the 2005 elections did not lead to mass involvement, after the immense disenchantment of the Iranian people during the eight years of Khatami’s so-called “reformist” presidency (1997-2005). With a very populist demagogic discourse, the candidate Ahmadi-Nejad made the most extravagant promises in order to attract the voters. By defrauding moderately (a few million votes), he managed to win the elections, against the other four candidates chosen among

more than a thousand applicants.

The masquerade of the 2009 presidential election is of a quite different nature. Everything was done to maintain the appearance of a democratic election between the four candidates from within the regime, screened by the Council of Guardians. To win back confidence, or rather to win back votes lost in advance, the Guide-Ahmadi-Nejad faction changed tactics and modified the rules of the game. During the period of the electoral campaign relatively free televised debates were organized, new newspapers were authorized to appear.

During the period of conflict around the nuclear programme the regime needed to demonstrate its legitimacy to the "international community". Since it was unaware of the level of dissatisfaction and opposition which exists in the country, a spectacular show of televised debates was organized two weeks before the poll, an event never seen in the 30 years of existence of the regime. The press and the media of the reformist faction benefited from relative freedom, of short duration. Within the framework of the existing order, each of the four candidates was allowed to expose the weak points of their adversaries.

Corruption, incompetence, lies and deception were the noblest accusations, and even Ahmadi-Nejad, certain of the support of Khamenei, crossed the usual red lines. His target was Rafsanjani, former president and rival of the Supreme Guide, whose fortune is colossal. But the elite of the regime, in both of the factions, underestimated the level of hatred and anger among the young people, women and workers who compose more than 80 per cent of the population. This debate among the candidates was the straw that broke the camel's back of the people's anger, accumulated during the last 30 years.

The televised debates played a crucial role in the promotion of Moussavi against the outgoing President. Whereas Ahmadi-Nejad blithely denied the extent of inflation, unemployment, the decline in the economy and corruption, Moussavi underlined the scale of the disasters caused during the first term of the outgoing President. The latter was perceived as being cynical, arrogant and a liar by the vast majority of viewers, while his opponent, who during the past two decades had had no political responsibility in the regime, seemed the least bad of the four. Ahmadi-Nejad even went so far as to attack Moussavi's wife, something which viewers found intolerable. He accused some eminent members of the political elite, including Rafsanjani, of corruption, whereas during the whole of his presidency, he had provided the judicial system with no reliable evidence against those he incriminated.

In reality most Iranians were already aware of the enormous wealth, accumulated by corruption, of Rafsanjani and his family. It was the foreign accounts of close relatives of Khamenei (including his son, whose personal account containing 1.6 billion pounds was blocked in London) and diagrams showing the key financial positions occupied by Ahmadi-Nejad's entourage, that decredibilised this conservative candidate, a demagogue and a liar, who was the favourite of the dominant faction of the regime.

Television debates thus played a fundamental role, not only for the massive participation of Iranians, especially young people and women, who went to vote against Ahmadi-Nejad, but also to break the wall of fear that reigned in Iranian society in previous years. This side effect was much more important than the debates themselves.

This new situation, of capital importance, added to the exceptional circumstances of this pre-election period. For a few weeks an intense socialization, of a character that was festive, emotional, exuberant, in a word, revolutionary, took place in the streets. It is interesting to note that since those days a daily newspaper entitled "The Street" has been published illegally by young revolutionary Marxists. Groups of young people began to take to the streets, thirsting for freedom and making their voices heard. They stayed late into the night discussing among themselves. Groups of economists, sociologists, artists, university professors and well-known intellectuals, and also workers, became active in this pre-election period, denouncing the populist demagoguery of Ahmadi-Nejad. Having no other choice, a large majority of Iranians was forced to vote for Moussavi, in whom they saw the negation of the entire

regime.

On June 12, the day of the elections, there was a massive turn-out, exceeding the hopes of the partisans of the regime (more than 39 million people voted, out of a potential 46 million voters). But the day after the elections there was a rude shock: it was announced that the outgoing president had been elected by 63 per cent of the population, against Moussavi who had only received half as many votes as him. In the eyes of a large part of public opinion, everything pointed to massive fraud, backed up at the top of the state in a clumsy manner that did not even comply with the basic rules of verification (ten days for the filing of complaints).

Three hours after the closure of the polls, the Iranian Interior Ministry had called Moussavi's headquarters to congratulate him and ask him to prepare a victory speech. Then suddenly, everything changed. Several commanders of the Guardians of the Revolution (GIR) occupied and confiscated Moussavi's campaign headquarters. Subsequently, the rigged election results were announced, triggering a wave of protests.

It is obvious that Khamenei, surrounded by subordinate advisors, underestimated the anger of the people caused by the rigged election result. Otherwise he would have chosen a more modest percentage for the "victory" of Ahmadi-Nejad. But in order to establish Ahmadi-Nejad as a truly legitimate leader of the Iranians, Khamenei needed a vote higher than the 20 million obtained by Khatami in 1997. Looking back, we may think that it was perhaps possible that the Islamic system could be saved if the regime had just been content with an Ahmadi-Nejad victory by a smaller margin, or even a second round. Alternatively, a Moussavi presidency - in spite of the problem posed by his exaggerated promises of individual freedom in a religious state - would certainly have extended the life of the Islamic regime for a few years, until another generation of Iranian youth turned its back on empty promises of reform and revolted against the cowardice and the reluctance to change of "modernist Islamists."

The three weeks which preceded the elections have been called by some people the "Iranian spring." People - especially youth and women - experienced a period of a break with repression, with Islamist ideology, theocratic phraseology and Sharia law. In a word, a break with everything that Ahmadi-Nejad embodies. They were able to taste freedom of expression and discover democratic demonstrations. Those days have profoundly shaken the symbolic foundations of Islamist power: fear was replaced by audacity, mourning by a festival spirit and individualism by solidarity. The regime has opened a Pandora's Box – the set-up that it organized turned against it. This electoral scenario was a concession to the people and the regime believed erroneously that it would be temporary. In fact, once it had tasted the forbidden fruit, with the blessing of the regime, the population was ready to fight to make it permanent. This totally escaped the Islamist state, all of its factions, including the "reformists", who believed that the new generations were passive and docile. They proved to be quite the contrary.

Once the results were announced, it quickly became clear that Moussavi is a weak character and his popularity steadily declined, because he was trying to catch the mass movement by the tail in order to control it so that it would not go beyond the legal framework of the system. Moussavi (in reality the faction of the regime that he represents) finds himself, without having wanted to, in the eye of a cyclone of historic dimensions. And if this faction is losing its privileges, it now has no choice but to follow this human tide. It says that the supreme leader is illegitimate. His credibility as a religious authority has been and remains low. Now his credibility as a supreme leader is also compromised. No doubt Moussavi is not Khomeini. But Khamenei looks increasingly like the Shah or rather like a Caliph.

But what is the real power behind this rigged presidential election, referred to as an "electoral coup d'état" by the Moussavi camp? It is generally considered that as commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Iran, the Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Khamenei, is the leader of this coup d'état. But the reality is more complex.

Since the arrival in power of Ahmadi-Nejad in 2005, the commanders the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (GIR)

have missed no opportunity to talk of an "internal threat" against the revolution. Furthermore, a few days before the elections of 12 June, the head of the Political Department of the GIR charged Moussavi and other reformers with attempting a coloured revolution (Moussavi has used green, the color of Shia Islam, as symbol of his campaign), and warned that the Paskarans "would asphyxiate it before it was even born." The authors of this "coup d'état" are in fact members of the high command of the IRG.

Who are the Paskarans?

The present members of the Paskarans were about twenty years old at the time of the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979. They joined the GIR almost immediately after the revolution and conducted two ferocious wars in the 1980s: against the army of Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Iran in September 1980, and against the opponents of the regime inside the country, such as the left groups and the People's Mujahedeen. In June 1981, the GIR carried out a bloody battle against them, killing tens of thousands, and forced tens of thousands of opponents of the regime to go into exile.

During the war with Iraq (1981-1988), the GIR were also used by the regime as the key instrument to impose severe political repression in Iran, with as a result the physical elimination from the Iranian scene of all the secular political groups. That was done to permit the installation of a capitalist-religious dictatorship. Immediately after the end of the war with Iraq thousands of political prisoners were savagely executed with the agreement of the Paskarans. Ayatollah Khomeini died in June 1989 and these young Paskarans then split into two camps.

In the camp of the so-called "Islamic left" it was felt that, with the aim of avoiding a revolution, the regime needed a policy of opening out and should put an end to the fierce repression of the 1980s. Many members of this group came from the intelligence services and were consequently perfectly aware of what was happening in society, feeling the danger of a social explosion and a revolution. Their vision was to reform the system within the Islamic framework in order to save the regime. They became "reformist Islamists". Thus the reformist faction was born and Khatami, spokesperson of its moderate wing, became President of the Republic in 1997. The Paskarans of the opposite camp were very conservative and remained in the GIR after the war. Ahmadi-Nejad and his government team belong to this camp.

In parallel another phenomenon developed. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini another concept of "Islamic State", even more reactionary than of Khomeini, started to reappear with the emergence of the ultra-reactionary Islamist group called the "Hojjatiyeh society". It had been founded in the 1950s and was savagely opposed to the Baha'i faith and to Sunni Islam. It had even collaborated with the secret services of the Shah to fight against the propagation of communism in Iran. It had also been also opposed to the Revolution of 1979 and the concept of "velayat-e-faqih" (government of the Islamic jurists) developed by Khomeini, which is the base of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its political system. Khomeini prohibited Hojjatiyeh in 1983. Their current chief is the Ayatollah Mesbah, an ultra-reactionary cleric who is a partisan of the hard line, and who has openly opposed any elections. He is the spiritual leader of Ahmadi-Nejad. Among the disciples of the Ayatollah Mesbah, we find the majority of the ministers of the present government, a good number of the high commanders of the GIR and their Bassiji militia, the paramilitary arm of the GIR, as well as members of the judicial hierarchy.

Since he was elected president in 2005, Ahmadi-Nejad has used on many occasions the words of the Ayatollah Mesbah, speaking about the "Islamic State of Iran" rather than the "Islamic Republic of Iran." Two weeks before the elections Mesbah published a fatwa - whose contents were revealed by certain members of the Ministry of the Interior - authorizing the use of all means to get Ahmadi-Nejad re-elected and thus giving a green light to the rigging of the elections. The theocratic vision of "the Islamic State" propagated by Hojjatiyeh corresponds well to the political ambitions of the GIR. Today the dominant conservative faction of the regime is based on the alliance between a

handful of mullahs from Hojjatiyeh and members of the high command of the GIR.

It is true that on the political level the role played by the GIR in Iran in the past was far from having the importance of that played by the army in Turkey or in Pakistan. But the evolution of the political scene and the increasingly dominant weight of the GIR testify to their accelerated rise at the expense of the clergy.

A capitalist regime using extreme populist nationalist slogans, ruling the country by the terror exercised by the bands of hooligans of the militia, wishing to be acclaimed by a public that is not authorised to organize itself in any form other than that which is dictated from on high, having moreover militarist ambitions... Where have we seen that before?

Who are these millions of demonstrators?

The day after the election, on June 13, while Moussavi's camp hesitated to react to the results, students and left-wing activists were the first to take the streets of Teheran. They were joined by demonstrators from the working-class districts of the suburbs of Teheran, which hate Ahmadi-Nejad.

In fact, from the beginning of this summer, workers (who experienced a considerable drop in their standard of living during the last three years), unemployed youth and students (who have suffered four years of police presence in the campuses) were at the head of the protests. Young women in particular hate the regime for its constant interference in their daily life. By their presence in the streets of Teheran early on June 15, they encouraged hundreds of thousands of Tehran residents (including people coming from the middle classes) to join the demonstrators. All that very much encouraged Moussavi to take part in the demonstration himself late the afternoon. They continued to demonstrate even after the repression had intensified. In the absence of a clear directive on the part of Moussavi or the other candidate qualified as reformist, Mehdi Karroubi, it was they who launched a call for the demonstrations of July 9, the anniversary of the bloody repression of the student movement of 1999.

Nobody can doubt the significance of the day of June 15. For years Iranians remained isolated, demoralized and fearful in the face of the regime. This Monday, according to the mayor of Tehran, approximately three million people were in the streets of the capital. In Ispahan, the historic Shah Jahan square (one of the biggest squares in the world) was black with protesters. The towns of Shiraz and Tabriz saw demonstrations of unprecedented size. The Iranians had finally spoken and the solidarity which they found in these protests gave them unprecedented confidence and the feeling of victory.

As in 1979, it is this confidence which encourages them to confront the most brutal forms of repression with audacity and determination. Unarmed demonstrators face the Bassiji, apparently without fear for their life. During a protest in a shantytown in the suburbs of Tehran, where the regular battles with the authorities of those who live beyond the official boundary of Teheran had led to the deployment of the Bassiji, the crowd shouted "death to the dictator!", attacked the Bassiji and successful drove them out of the town, making them abandon their motor bikes. That also happened in the working-class districts of Tehran.

If the middle-class districts of Tehran were quiet during the day (at night people go up onto the roofs all over the city and launch slogans against the regime), on the other hand the working class districts, the factories, the mines and the shantytowns were the scene of impromptu protests on a large scale.

At the head of those who defied fear and repression and invaded the streets of Teheran we find women (a good

many of them under 30) who will never forget how the Pasdarans stopped them because they were showing a wisp of hair and whipped them (in many cases 60 to 80 lashes), young people, men and women, who during the last twenty or thirty years have been stopped, humiliated and imprisoned not simply for having expressed a political opinion, but in hundreds of thousands of cases, for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic dress rules or codes of behaviour. Those people will never forget the morality squads.

This is also the case with students who have had enough of the interference of the state in every aspect of their private and public lives, of workers who face poverty, non-payment of wages, unemployment, of the inhabitants of the shantytowns who are in permanent conflict with the authorities because of the lack of water or electricity, of the families of those who were killed by the regime, and not simply in the recent protests, in which at least 350 people lost their lives; it is also the case of the families of more than 30,000 activists executed by the regime for their political ideas between 1981 and 1983, and in the 1980s and 1990s (and let us not forget that the torturers of more than 6,000 of the political prisoners who were murdered in the prisons are to be found as much in the so-called reformist camp as in the conservative camp). Nobody will forgive or forget the criminals who were responsible.

The divisions at the top have opened a space for an authentic mass movement.

To clarify the minds of our anti-imperialist sceptics, let us see what is the attitude of the vanguard of the Iranian working-class. During the electoral campaign, the majority of trade-union and workers' organizations (which are illegal) did not call for a vote for any of the candidates, because, they explained, none of the candidates represented the interests of the workers. This position was perfectly correct. However, once the mass movement had begun, the Tehran bus drivers' trade union (Vahed) expressed its unequivocal support for the movement. In the same way, the workers of Iran Khodro organized a half-hour strike to support the movement.

On June 18, the Tehran bus drivers' union published a communiqué. This is one of the most militant sectors of the Iranian working class which, two years ago, faced brutal repression to defend its trade union rights. Before the elections, the trade union had rightly declared that none of the candidates defended the interests of the Iranian workers. But also correctly, it welcomes today "the splendid movement of millions of people of all ages, all sexes, all religious affiliations and all nationalities". The communiqué continues: "We support this movement of the Iranian people to build a free and independent civil society - and we condemn any violence and any repression". What a difference between this declaration and the speeches of Moussavi and his reformists, even the most radical of them! Still more significant is the mobilization of the workers of the Iran Khodro factory, the biggest enterprise of the car industry in the whole of the Middle East (100,000 workers, including 30,000 in a single factory). On Thursday 18 they organized a strike action in support of the movement of the people. Here is the full text of the communiqué announcing the strike:

"We declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran. What we are seeing today is an insult to the intelligence of the people and to its vote. The government is trampling on the principles of the Constitution. It is our duty to join the movement of the people. Today, Thursday 18, we, the workers of Iran Khodro, will cease work during half an hour to protest against the repression of students, workers and women. We declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran. The day shift: from 10.00 to 10.30. The night shift: from 3.00 to 3.30. The workers of Iran Khodro".

These two declarations and the strike action of the workers of Khodro are very important. They are two of the most combative sectors of the Iranian working class, and they are the vanguard of the trade union movement which is starting to re-emerge. The idea of a general strike was raised, but not yet applied. That is the decisive question. In 1979, it was the strike of the oil workers which dealt the final mortal blow in the long process of the overthrow of the

Shah's regime.

On July 1 thousands of workers in a mine in the province of Khuzestan went on strike and when the security forces arrived to disperse them, the workers shouted "death to the dictator!".

On July 5 the workers of the Haft Tapeh sugar cane factory went on strike again, accusing the authorities of not satisfying their previous demands.

The discussions about a strike continued and, three weeks after the beginning of the protests, an organization called "the Workers' Committee for the Defence of the Popular Protests" published several communiqués concerning the organization of the demonstrations, the security measures, the self-defence councils in the face of the attacks of the Bassiji and detailed suggestions concerning civil disobedience.

With every day that passes the two reformist candidates increasingly lose the support of the people. After having waited two weeks, hoping for a breakthrough with the Council of Guardians, Karroubi, Moussavi and the former reformist President Khatami finally published a Joint Declaration denouncing the faked result of the election. They refuse to legitimate the new government. However, ordinary Iranians are very furious with Moussavi who is conducting an "ordinary quarrel between members of the same Islamic family". Meanwhile, the ally of the reformists within the Assembly of Experts, Rafsanjani, was seeking the maximum number of votes in order to remove the Supreme Guide from office, or at least to exert pressure on him.

As always, the "reformists" realize that their destiny is really attached to the existence of the regime. However by seeking solutions within the circles of power, while promising the impossible to the crowds in the streets, they are digging their own grave. They know that in June 2009 they only received the support of many Iranians because the people chose the lesser evil. Once the regime chose to put a stop to this limited occasion and slam the door, the days of the support for Moussavi and Karroubi are numbered. However, nobody should underestimate the effect that this unprecedented schism will have at the top of the Islamic regime.

As already mentioned above, the Islamic Republic has a very complicated and unparalleled power structure. Power is in the hands of complex networks of clerical, executive, legal, military and paramilitary circles. Up to now all these forces, in spite of their factional differences and allegiances, obeyed the Supreme Guide. In fact, throughout the thirty last years, the most important role played by Khomeini and his successor Khamenei, as Supreme Guide, was that of an all-powerful arbiter between the various factions of the regime. On June 19 of this year all that came to an end, when Khamenei declared the unambiguous validity of the results of the presidential election and took the side of Ahmadi-Nejad. It is thus correct to identify the Supreme Guide as the principal loser in the present situation.

The reformists are also losers. With every passing day, their support within the population continues to diminish. They have got themselves stuck in a trap by trying to save an Islamic order.

But there are also winners: the people of Iran, the demonstrators, those who every day risk their lives against the regime and its military and paramilitary forces. The repression is ferocious. However, it demonstrates the desperation of the regime. The innovative manner in which Iranians on each occasion expressed their hatred of the present regime gave them hope and confidence, which assures them that the conflict in progress will finish with the overthrow of the regime. It has created too many enemies for itself, particularly among young people, women, workers and the poor, for anyone to accept its continued existence.

The parents of those who have been arrested in recent demonstrations gather each midday outside the prisons, demanding the release of their children and other prisoners and claiming justice for those killed by the Bassiji in the

streets or under torture in the prisons. The majority of people not only refuse four more years for Ahmadi-Nejad, but the regime in its totality has become in their eyes unbearable. They will not stop their protests, with or without Moussavi and Karroubi.

Solidarity

The images of brutal repression against the youth, the workers and the women of Iran have provoked a wave of indignation, in the whole world.

The regime had its last chance of attracting the Iranian people with promises of an order that would be slightly less repressive, under cover of a Moussavi presidency. It missed this occasion. Confronted with fierce repression inside the country and the permanent threat of a military attack, the kind of solidarity that the people of Iran certainly do not need is the kind offered by the imperialist states and their associates, of "regime change" inside the country. The enemies of the workers - in the camp of Moussavi, among the monarchists or in the confused left - will seek the support of the European states and the government of the United States, while the defenders of the Iranian workers will remain vigilant in choosing their allies.

For the moment, the military-religious oligarchy, which has consolidated its power and its privileges, has stated very clearly that it wants an Islamic government where popular sovereignty is reduced to nothing. Legitimacy drawn from divine power is sufficient unto itself. This is the meaning of the speech by Khamenei on Friday June 19, 2009. This oligarchy will not allow itself to be deprived of its power.

But in the midst of all these events which are agitating Iran, one thing is certain. From now on, it is too late to go into reverse. All the elements show that the popular movement has established itself for the long haul, whatever the violence of the Bassiji militiamen, who come from the working class and are despised by the middle classes and those with higher education. And cracks will emerge at the top.

Sooner or later a brutal military dictatorship of a divided "mullahrchy", supported by legions of Bassiji militiamen will try to impose itself. But this solution could not last.

This electoral coup d'état had two irreversible consequences for the Iranian people. The first is the end of the fear of the people who were terrorized by the brutality of the regime which ruled for years in Iran. The second consequence is to release the Iranians once and for all from all illusions as to the possibility of the regime being reformed. When Moussavi asks people to stay inside their houses and on the contrary the people demonstrate in their millions, the reformists get a sharp slap in the face. In fact, we have witnessed a spectacle in which "reformists" run after the people in order not to be pushed aside, and it is not the first time! Then Moussavi and his team-mate Karroubi had to appear in the following demonstrations, clearly desperate to be able to regain the initiative and to control the protest movement so that it does not cross the green line. And at each stage they have struggled to keep up with popular anger.

The bloody repression of the demonstrators and the cowardice of the bourgeois reformists will push the reformists leaders further back and marginalize them. The road is now open for the system in its totality to be defied from below. The road will be long and difficult. It is not difficult to see the reasons for that. The regime has proved that it has no difficulty in imposing fierce repression. It is an ideological regime, organized on fascistic lines, and it will fight to survive. It has a military force and a paramilitary militia, well organized and with very important financial interests.

Where is the Islamic Republic going?

It is difficult to envisage what will occur. However, we can be sure that nothing will be the same again. No one will forget the fact that the two factions crossed many "red lines" exposing corruption, deception and the failure of the other. It will therefore be a very large, delicate and long confrontation. It is essential that those who are struggling in Iran obtain the broad and effective support of the left and of progressive people, so that they do not fall into the false conceptions of the type of left which does not have any concern for democracy and civil liberties.

Our association "Socialist Solidarity with the Workers in Iran", by defending the interests of the workers in Iran, by maintaining a firm and consistent position, at the same time anti-imperialist and of opposition to the regime, is in a good situation to extend and relay a broad campaign of support for the struggles of the Iranian people. So we warmly welcome the collaboration of all the Iranian and international forces which share these principles. We cannot link up with the defenders of Moussavi, nor with those who seek war or sanctions, in order to avoid a change from below. We will not suspend our criticisms of those who tolerate imperialist war or economic sanctions - measures which above all harm the Iranian workers.

August 2009

[1] See "Iran, a Caliphate disguised as a Republic", International Viewpoint n° 382, October 2006.

[2] See "An Islamic "Chinese Model'?" International Viewpoint n° 382, October 2006.

[3] Let us note that the hundred biggest Iranian capitalists are... mullahs. They belong in a fairly balanced way to the two factions of the clergy, factions which actually represent divisions within the Iranian bourgeoisie.