

# Iran: the political situation in the aftermath of the mass protests

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According to international press reports, the situation in Iran has now "calmed down" or "normalised". Human rights organisations and Iranian student groups report that over the weekend of July 17-18 about 1,400 were arrested, up to a dozen were killed by the police, and many have "disappeared".

The *Taz* newspaper reports that some, like student leaders Manoucher Mohammadi and Gholamreza Mohajeri Nejad, could face the death penalty. The prohibition of *Salam* magazine, which sparked the student protests, remains in force. Isolated attacks on liberal publications, journalists and politicians have also occurred. Demonstrations have been banned and have not recurred.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the struggle for democracy in Iran has been decided. On the contrary, none of the fundamental problems that led to the mass protests have been resolved.

The political weight of the army, police, paramilitary troops and the "conservatives" in the Iranian establishment has been strengthened. For days, the population was terrorised by the religious militia, with the support of the security forces. They stormed meetings, and shot and flogged protesters. According to press reports, the commanders of 24 of the extreme right-wing "revolutionary guards" criticised President Khatami in an open letter for his "too liberal attitude". In threatening tones they added that the Islamic system should not be sacrificed to democracy, regardless the cost.

The "reformer" Khatami endorsed the brutal suppression of the mass protests. He and his supporters expressed almost the same attitude as the hard-liners around the religious head Ayatollah Khamenei. They declared that after a few days, the "completely understandable and justifiable student protests"

unleashed by the "unfortunate" killings, when police and paramilitaries stormed student hostels, had been taken over by "quite different forces" which were controlled "from abroad". These were said to have looted businesses, carried out acts of violence, and aimed at the overthrow of the state.

Accordingly, it became necessary to quash the protests. The Swiss *Neue Züricher Zeitung* reported that a whole number of "reform-oriented" publications, and even student organisations that were involved in the protests, had expressed similar views. They concluded that in future anything that might lead to acts of violence must be avoided.

On the other hand, even conservative Iranian newspapers confirmed that the "fight for reforms and more democracy" would continue to receive support. Most of the reformist publications, organisations and politicians were spared; a few hundred arrested students have already been set free.

While internally the mullahs' regime suppresses every mobilisation of broader social layers for democratic rights as a "foreign infiltration", it strives to improve relations with the western imperialist powers. The Associated Press reported that at the high point of the terror against the students, President Khatami met with the British Ambassador.

Twenty years after the fall of the Shah, whom Great Britain supported, official diplomatic relations between the two countries are once again operational. This occurred literally at the same time British planes were participating in the bombing of neighbouring Iraq.

Iran has for some time sought to take up once again the policy of the Shah, portraying the country as an "island of calm in a stormy sea". In particular, relations with Saudi Arabia have improved. Within the context of the so-called Middle East "peace process", Iran has

used its influence over the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas to encourage their adoption of a more establishment role.

The background to this foreign policy, just like the "reforms" at home, is shaped by the necessity of the Iranian bourgeoisie to create closer links with international capital, and to open up the national economy. After the fall of the Shah's regime, important sections of the economy were nationalised and brought under state planning and control, i.e., in the context of the "Islamic Republic", under the control of the mullahs.

This created the basis for the fat sinecures and privileges of many clergy and their supporters amongst the bazaar merchants, intellectuals and religious militia. For the Iranian working class, it offered a certain protection from the unrestrained workings of the capitalist world market, and some limited social concessions.

However, Iran lost its link to globalisation and sank ever more deeply into the mire of debt, inflation and corruption. Sections of the clerics and intelligentsia now want to counter this. They call for society to be "modernised", for the economy, in particular the oil industry, to be made more competitive and more open to international capital, and seek closer cooperation with the West.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (July 21) spoke warmly of the attitude of these, essentially quite conservative, layers: "[T]he editor-in-chief of *Salam*, whose prohibition drove the students onto the streets, led the 1979 occupation of the American embassy. If, in the meantime, Abbas Abdi criticises the system, that does not mean that he wants to abolish the Islamic republic. He wants to reform it, because it does not correspond yet to the ideal for which he took to the barricades twenty years ago. Moreover, his ideals have become a little more conciliatory." To this end, it is necessary to diminish the influence of the religious leaders over economics and society as a whole.

The July 19 edition of *Taz* wrote: "[M]illions of barrels of oil lie underground. That no profits are being made from this is not only due to the price of oil, but also to the 'Islamic' (mis)management... Many of the protesting students come from the religious milieu. For this reason they do not question the Islamic character of Iran, but rather the principle of 'welajat e faqih', state

rule of the priesthood, and thus the basis of theocratic rule introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini."

This type of capitalist "democratisation" and "secularisation" of Iran, which imperialism also supports, can only aggravate the social conditions facing the majority of the population. Therefore the "reformers" and "democrats" are hostile to any serious threat from below to the state, the police, army, secret services, religious militia and Islamic clergy.

The *Neue Züricher Zeitung* noted July 19 with self-satisfaction: "[H]alf a week after the end of the week-long demonstrations and clashes in Teheran and other provincial towns, the security forces and Basij-militia seem to have succeeded in calming the streets. But by no means is there an impression of graveyard peace. The reformist press continues to appear, and the student federations have demanded a meeting with the highest government representatives to defend their call for the protection of civil liberties. On Sunday, the Revolutionary Guards reduced their presence in the capital, and the Basij was limited to guarding important road junctions. The situation presents a picture of two tendencies that have experienced a shock from the rapid degeneration of the street protests, and which now recognise the danger of destabilising the whole state. Now, reformers and revolutionary nostalgics [conservative Islamic 'hard liners'] once again are considering the uncomfortable coexistence to which they obviously will be condemned for a long time."



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