

# Assault on press freedom intensifies political crisis in Iran

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The courts and other state institutions in Iran have reacted to the unmistakable rebuff the old regime suffered in the February 18 elections with draconian legal attacks on democratic rights and by mobilising goon squads using Islamic slogans. With this panicky reaction the clerical wing of the ruling elite is, if anything, undermining the efforts of the "reformers" around President Mohammad Khatami to prevent an open popular uprising.

In two steps, on April 23 and again some days later, the Iranian courts banned almost all newspapers and magazines supporting the so-called reformers. The ban applies to 16 publications, which are accused of "insulting Islamic relics" and "violating national interests". Two prominent journalists were arrested and the national television channel carried a wild campaign of denunciations. MPs supporting this course are further demanding impeachment procedures against the ministers of culture and the interior, both of whom are close to Khatami.

The newspaper prohibitions had been prepared by the old, pre-election parliament, which had tightened up the press laws. The new parliament is due to assemble at the end of May. Prior to that, however, run-off elections are to take place in 66 constituencies. After the first round two months ago, it appeared that Khatami's supporters would achieve a two-thirds majority, and thus gain the possibility of changing the constitution.

The Council of Guardians, an institution that stands above parliament, has annulled the election results of 12 constituencies so far. The authorities have still not officially acknowledged the results in Teheran, where Khatami's associates won 29 of 30 seats.

Since the beginning of April, supporters of the old regime have demonstrated several times. Their leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the religious head of the Islamic republic, violently attacked the reformist press as "bastions of the enemies abroad".

The protests were not as large as earlier demonstrations. Moreover, for the first time many bazaar traders, previously supporters of the traditional Islamic leadership, did not follow the strike call.

The conservatives now mainly rely on influential sections of the state apparatus and the paramilitary organisations of the *Basij* and Revolutionary Guards. In a statement at the beginning of April, the latter made unconcealed threats to use "revolutionary force" against "some of the print media and those who talk about unlimited reforms". On receiving a sign from their leader (Khamenei) they would "bring down the hammer of revolution on the heads of the enemy both small and large, so that in the future they stop breeding conspiracy and committing betrayal".

On the other side, there has been a series of protests against the annulling of election results and against press censorship. There were demonstrations and rallies in several cities. According to media reports, in Khalchal thousands of demonstrators set a theological university alight. In Rasht and Khorramabad there were clashes between police and demonstrators, and arrests were made. In Sarvestan demonstrators set fire to a bitumen factory.

Strikes have been taking place for some time in different branches of industry against worsening working and living conditions. In many places no wages have been paid for months. The government has poured oil on the fire, with a draft law abolishing labour regulations for all workplaces employing fewer than five persons. Such a law removes labour protection legislation from about two-thirds of all workers.

Rumours are reportedly circulating in Teheran about a possible coup d'etat before the new parliament can meet. In a speech given to workers last Saturday, President Khatami raised this danger, not to mobilise against it, but to restrain the opposition.

"The Iranian nation is revolutionary," Khatami said,

"and nothing will be able to halt its achievements, i.e., reforms.... There are those trying to create tensions and a violent atmosphere in society, but I ask all people—particularly students and workers who may be provoked—to remain peaceful." At several universities students heeded his words and protested silently, with tape over their mouths.

In the present situation in Iran, nothing could be more dangerous than to entrust the fight for democratic liberties to the so-called reformers around Khatami. It is no coincidence that the day after the newspaper prohibitions the reformist politicians met with Ayatollah Khamenei. Last year Khatami unambiguously supported the bloody suppression of student protests.

Khatami's role is in keeping with the historical role of the Iranian liberal bourgeoisie. Already in the abortive bourgeois revolution of 1906, the representatives of the Iranian bourgeoisie promised the democratic rule of law, only to immediately fall into the arms of the colonial power at that time, Britain. The entire history of this social layer stamps it as too cowardly and weak to implement even the most elementary democratic principles.

Khatami's policy represents an attempt by sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie to preserve their power by means of a political reorientation. To this end, some safety valves are to be temporarily opened for the discontent inside the country.

Above all, however, this elite is looking for new support from abroad. The wing around Khatami wants to use the opportunities now opening up with the reorientation of American policy in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Iran is to be placed once again at the direct service of the US and the European Union (EU), both economically and strategically. This policy cannot lead to more democracy, but only to a new form of despotism.

Domestically, the previous situation can no longer be sustained. Unemployment officially stands at 14 percent, but unofficial estimates, taking into account under-employment, put the figure as high as 40 percent. The Iranian currency, the rial, has lost over half its value in relation to the US dollar in two years. The state, which still controls a substantial part of the economy, is consumed with corruption and nepotism.

For the majority of the Iranian population, the slogans of "change" and "reform" signify improved living standards and greater political and cultural freedom. But Khatami understands these slogans to mean deregulation, privatisation and the opening up of the Iranian economy

to foreign capital. In recent months he has systematically sought rapprochement with the US and EU.

His conservative opponents do not reject this course in principle, but fear that the accompanying reorientation and loosening of frozen power structures could destabilise the regime, robbing them of their privileges. Thus Ayatollah Khamenei stressed repeatedly that Khatami was "an honourable and religious man", and that reforms were compatible with Islam. What were to be rejected, however, were "Western" reforms. The statement by the Revolutionary Guards noted above was similar in content, although expressed less diplomatically.

The conservative clerics fear losing their sources of income. Apart from the national media, these include, above all, various foundations ( *bonyads*), e.g., *Bonyad Mostazafan* (foundation for the poor and war-wounded).

The latter alone is reported to embrace no less than 400 enterprises of all kinds. Altogether the foundations control 40 percent of the Iranian economy in the non-oil sector. They have favourable access to foreign currency and cheap credits from the state banks. So far, they have paid no taxes.

A large restructuring of the economy along the lines Khatami is proposing would directly threaten the good life enjoyed by the old clerical faction, while a handful of social climbers from the camp of the "reformers" expects to gain new privileges through their good relations with the West.

The fight for freedom of expression and the press must not become a pawn in a struggle for power within the ruling elite, which today swears to uphold it but is prepared tomorrow to abandon it. The growing disillusionment with Islamic rule must be directed along genuinely progressive and revolutionary lines, to ensure it does not smooth the way for a new version of modern colonialism.



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