

On eve of President Khatami's visit to Germany

Students, workers protest in Iran

A reporter
14 July 2000

Over the past week the German government has hosted Iranian President Mohamed Khatami in a state visit designed to underscore Berlin's support for the pro-Western, "reform" faction of the Islamic ruling caste. German Prime Minister Schroeder has taken extraordinary security measures in an attempt to intimidate the thousands of Iranian exiles who have gathered in Berlin to protest Khatami's visit, denouncing the ongoing repression in Iran and Khatami's defence of Islamic clerical rule.

On the eve of Khatami's trip, students and workers in Iran took to the streets as well to mark the first anniversary of last year's mass student demonstrations, which were brutally suppressed, and to protest the continuing grip of the mullahs on Iranian society.

Events in Teheran on July 8 cast a light on political conditions in Iran, exposing both Khatami's democratic pretensions and the hypocrisy of the German government. The day before, the former president of Iran's parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, had delivered the traditional Friday prayer on the campus of Teheran University. "I welcome the fact that the students have decided to mark the anniversary in such a way as not to give rise to controversy," he declared. The official student federation, which is close to Khatami and the "reformers", had called for flowers to be peacefully distributed on Saturday to relatives of victims of the regime, and urged that students refrain from advancing radical slogans that would provoke the ruling circles.

When despite this a few hundred students shouted "death to the dictators" they were violently attacked by the Revolutionary Guards and the Hezbollah militia and fled to the city centre, where thousands had already assembled to demonstrate their solidarity with the students.

The crowd, which according to press reports included all ages and many unemployed young people, focused its displeasure on President Khatami. The most popular slogan, which was echoed in other cities such as Shiraz and Isfahan, was "Khatami, this is your last chance!" According to Reuters, the crowd also shouted, "The clerics live like kings, while the people are reduced to poverty," and "Khatami, Khatami, show your power or resign".

Reuters commented: "Among the starkest lessons of the latest unrest was the failure of 'flower power' in the face of a society increasingly pressured by mounting economic hardship and frustrated in its demands for basic rights and freedoms."

Other press reports told of military conscripts refusing to obey their officers' instructions to break up the demonstrations, whereupon government militia went into action, armed with batons, wooden clubs and electric cables. By evening, the Hezbollah militia had Teheran's central Revolution Square under control. The city centre was a picture of devastation.

The next day, Khatami met with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's religious head, and other dignitaries. He condemned the "extremists" and dissociated himself from the students.

The appalling social situation in Iran has been highlighted by recent reports of protest marches in working class urban areas and slum districts. In the city of Abadan, which was built around one of Iran's largest oil refineries, a furious crowd assembled July 5 outside the governor's office, with temperatures well above 40 degrees Celsius, to protest the lack of drinking water. The authorities responded by shooting tear gas canisters into the crowd, but that only further provoked the population, resulting in even larger crowds. The next day protests expanded to neighbouring cities.

On June 27 in Shatereh slum dwellers marched to protest a lack of water and gas supplies. Many of the women who participated in the demonstration complained to the press about the lack of drinking water, the terrible poverty, unemployment and widespread drug abuse among young people. Some sources place opium consumption in Teheran at five tons a day.



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