

Who are the People's Mujahedin of Iran?

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Over the past weeks, Iranian and Western media have frequently featured articles and broadcast reports on the People's Mujahedin organization, the political core of the National Resistance Council of Iran. This group carries out armed attacks on facilities and members of the security forces in Iran and has organized a number of demonstrations and protest rallies with several thousand participants against the Iranian regime and in particular against Iranian State President Mohammed Khatami.

Western media attacks on the Mujahedin serve the purpose of justifying collaboration with the representative of a bloodstained regime for transparent economic and geo-strategic interests. But it would be mistaken to draw the reverse conclusion that the People's Mujahedin are a progressive liberation or resistance movement.

The speed with which the attitude of official politics and media towards such organizations changes in tandem with shifts in Western foreign policy was quite amply demonstrated recently in the case of the Kosovo-Albanian KLA. At any rate, a look at the history and the perspectives of the People's Mujahedin makes it quite clear that the Iranian masses can expect no liberation from poverty and repression from them.

The group came into being as a radical split-off of the so-called "Liberation Movement" and its Islamic Students Federation, which were founded in the early 1960s by supporters of Mohamed Mossadeq. As the prime minister of Iran in the early 1950s Mossadeq had nationalized the oil industry, which resulted in his being ousted from power in the infamous coup d'état of 1953 carried out by the Shah and the army with the decisive support of the CIA. At that time, the majority of the Islamic clergy also supported the Shah.

Mehdi Bazargan, the leader of the Liberation Movement, had been chairman of the state-run oil industry under the Mossadeq government. Just like Mossadeq, his outlook was one of vehement anti-communism. What he feared most was a movement of the working class, not the Shah or imperialism. As opposed to Mossadeq and his National Front, however, Bazargan sought cooperation with the clergy. At first, his organization was tolerated by the Shah; only after the suppression of mass protests in 1963 was it banned, as were all other independent organizations.

In June 1963 the Shah's troops committed a horrific massacre among unarmed demonstrators. An American observer estimated that thousands were killed, the opposition set the figure at tens of thousands. This bloodbath was the baptism of the "White Revolution", the Shah's reaction to the profound economic crisis of the previous years which had brought high inflation rates and heavy foreign debt. The Shah's goal was to modernize the country and integrate it more fully into the capitalist world market. This policy was then implemented with brutal force and with no consideration whatsoever for the social and political needs of the population.

It was at this time that Ayatollah Khomeini first came into the political limelight. He attacked the repressive politics of the Shah's regime and was not sparing in his use of social demagoguery. This marked the beginning of the rift between the traditional clergy and the Shah, both of whom had up to then generally worked hand-in-hand when it came to subjugating the population. But, as the White Revolution proceeded, Reza Pahlevi found it

necessary to reduce some of the clergy's privileges and cede them to the state. The clergy's opposition now merged with that of the small traders and merchants who also felt threatened by the White Revolution.

At this point, there was little to be heard from the heirs of Mossadeq's National Front. The Tudeh, the Moscow-oriented Stalinist party, was also very reticent. This brought forth the birth of the People's Mujahedin. Young student members of Bazargan's Liberation Movement who rejected the tame attitude of the party leadership and who—as stated in later publications of the People's Mujahedin—admired Khomeini as a "national symbol", decided to take up "armed struggle", modeling themselves on the guerilla movements in Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam.

First, they developed their ideology in a discussion group. In doing so, they borrowed much from Marxism, but did not break with religion, attempting instead to re-interpret the Koran in a progressive manner. "Genuine" Islam, they claimed, stood up for the exploited and the disfranchised and advocated a classless society and equal rights for women at all levels. All that was required to recognize this was to interpret the Koran in its correct historical context. The clergy represented a "false" Islam in the interests of feudalism and capitalism.

The concepts of the Mujahedin were similar in many ways to those of the popular intellectual Ali Shariati (1933—1977), who was close to them politically. Shariati's ideas were to play an important role in the revolution against the Shah. They were more suitable for recruiting the younger generation than those of Khomeini.

The combination of social demands and Islam attracted a particular social stratum: radicalized university and school students from the conservative, religious families of the traditional Persian middle classes, the small-and large-scale traders, artisans and merchants of the bazaar, whose material basis had been severely reduced by the White Revolution. It was from these strata, which the People's Mujahedin initially considered to be the "progressive national bourgeoisie", that the clergy also drew its support. The Liberation Movement gathered financial aid there for the People's Mujahedin, and also provided journalistic support for the guerillas.

Other guerilla groups also emerged during this period, besides the People's Mujahedin. One of the better known of these was the Stalinist-oriented People's Fedayyin. This group also recruited its members mainly among students, but these were students from the newly emerging modern, educated middle classes (teachers, civil servants, etc.) with a predominantly anti-religious attitude. Despite heated debates and differences in social orientation—the Mujahedin found little support among the national and religious minorities and among women with their propagation of Shi'ite Islam—the People's Mujahedin were in agreement with most of the Stalinist organizations in their assessment of the more or less "progressive role" of the "national bourgeoisie".

Their search for "progressive" clerics and religious-minded reformists rendered them defenseless against Khomeini and the clerics, who were ultimately to reap the harvest of the revolution against the Shah. Far from representing an alternative to their clerical opponents of today, they served them as a left-wing fig leaf—until the clerics felt strong enough to take action against the Mujahedin.

The changes in society brought about by the White Revolution—above all the explosive growth of the working class and of the cities—increasingly resulted, despite the most brutal repression, in violent labor disputes and an influx of new members among the guerilla groups. Between 1971 and 1979, 360 members of these groups were shot dead, executed or tortured to death by the police—nearly a third of them People's Mujahedin.

The clergy also increasingly came into conflict with the Shah, who secularized Islamic law and no longer legitimized his rule with Islam, but rather with the "2500-year-old Aryan civilization". Khomeini's authority grew with the number of clerics who were imprisoned. Leaders of the People's Mujahedin met with him several times in his Iraqi exile between 1972 and 1974, and asked him for support. Khomeini promised support for the families of killed Mujahedin fighters, but stayed at a distance to them publicly, making sure not to impair either his own image or his relations to the clergy.

Disappointment with the oppositionist clerics finally led to a bloody split among the People's Mujahedin in 1975. A large group broke with Islam and turned to Maoism.

The revolution was set off on September 8 1978 by a massacre committed by the Shah's troops. According to government sources the death toll was 87, the opposition set the figure at over 4,000. The events that were now to unravel provided a clear refutation of the "progressive role" of the "national bourgeoisie".

In December, the Shah invited the National Front to form a government of "national reconciliation". One of the Front's leaders, Shapour Bakhtiar, accepted and was made prime minister. Bakhtiar had been minister of labor under the Mossadeq government. The memory of the massive working-class movement he had experienced at that time was undoubtedly still fresh in his mind, and this will have prompted him to take such a step in support of the Shah's regime. Even though Bakhtiar was promptly expelled from the National Front, this incident is indicative of the deep animosity of the liberal bourgeoisie to any grass-roots popular movement.

The rest of the National Front and the Liberation Movement clung to Khomeini's apron strings. They formed a joint provisional government, and Khomeini appointed Bazargan, the leader of the Liberation Movement, to be its head. To Bazargan, revolutionary masses were as much an abhorrence as they were to Bakhtiar. He accused the poor of "confusing revolution with looting" and vilified workers who occupied factories as "fifth-column royalists, Zionists and communists".

Immediately upon his return to Iran, Khomeini commenced negotiations on a "peaceful" transition of power with the military's general staff, and was successful in this endeavor. The rich bazaar merchants financed the efforts of the clergy to keep the revolution under control. They organized committees, law courts based on the Shari'ah (Islamic law) and armed militias which soon came to be known—and feared—throughout the country as the Pasdaran ("Guardians of the Revolution") and the Hizbollah ("Party of God"). None of the left-wing organizations questioned the authority of Imam Khomeini.

Soon after the overthrow of Bakhtiar in February 1979, the clergy's militias started "cleansing" "unreliable" committees, disarming other militias, suppressing strikes by workers and rebellions of national minorities such as the Kurds, and terrorizing secular organizations and newspapers.

The People's Mujahedin played an important and in many ways decisive role in consolidating the regime of the mullahs.

In February, the organization, which had been weakened by the 1975 split and unceasing persecution by the Shah's regime, reconstituted itself. In its new program—along with the old nationalist and social demands—it advocated democratic demands, which, unlike in the past, were very detailed. For the first time, the group also criticized the reactionary role of the bazaar merchants, but left its earlier criticism of the clergy

unmentioned.

At first, this would seem a paradox—after all, the clergy represented the interests of exactly these bazaar merchants. But this was in line with the Mujahedin's strategy of transforming the mullahs' Islamic Republic into a Democratic Islamic Republic from within. Consequently, they avoided a direct challenge to the clergy and, in particular, to its leader Khomeini, while at the same time attacking the clergy's political instruments, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), the Shari'ah courts and the militias.

Following a secret meeting of Mujahedin leader Masud Rajavi with Khomeini in February 1979, the Mujahedin generally condemned any resistance to the clergy and its henchmen and thugs up until November of that year, justifying this by claiming that such resistance only played into the hands of imperialism. And they let their radical image be used by the clergy without raising any objection—something the mullahs urgently needed, since most of them had, at best, taken a cowardly, if not openly supportive stance towards the Shah.

Ayatollah Beheshti, for instance, the infamous supreme judge and close collaborator of Khomeini's, stated at this time: "The Islamic Revolution rested on three pillars: Imam Khomeini, Ali Shariati and the Mujahedin organization." The media controlled by the clergy reported day in and day out on the heroic deeds and martyrs of the People's Mujahedin. Universities and high schools were named after them, governorships and other high-up government positions were given to their sympathizers. In return, the People's Mujahedin provided cover for "our Great Father Khomeini, the leader of the struggle against the monarchy", while Khomeini's people took over control of the army, the police, the judiciary, the state-run media and, not least of all, the extensive property of the Shah.

Although Khomeini's followers carried out the campaign for a referendum on the constitution of the Islamic Republic in December 1979 and the presidential elections in January 1980 with the methods of terror and intimidation, the People's Mujahedin declared that they "would always support the progressive clergy and, in particular, His Highness, the Great Khomeini". They boycotted the referendum, but contested the presidential and subsequent parliamentary elections with their own candidates. Although the Hizbollah strong-arm squads attacked them with increasing brutality and Khomeini let loose tirades obviously aimed at the People's Mujahedin against "hypocrites" who "confused Islam with Marxism" and were "worse than infidels", the Mujahedin continued to refer to him as the "beloved father" who had "liberated Iran from the monarchy and US imperialism".

Despite this, their candidates received a substantial number of votes, and in some cases even did better than well-known clerics from the IRP. But their presidential candidate Rajavi was excluded from the elections and the results of the parliamentary elections were annulled or manipulated so that none of the Mujahedin's candidates got a seat in parliament in May 1980.

Also, Khomeini had started in February to call for a "cultural revolution" against the universities, "those breeding grounds of the plague of westernization, of liberals, academics and other intellectuals". Under conditions where revolutionary ardor was still aflame, the mullahs could not tolerate even the most loyal of oppositions.

The People's Mujahedin, in turn, now declared "Only democracy can protect us against American imperialism", and openly criticized the clergy. They no longer referred to Khomeini as the "beloved father", but still avoided attacking him directly. They formed an alliance with the new president of the Islamic Republic, Bani-Sadr, who originally had been a follower and close collaborator of Khomeini, but who had come into conflict with the IRP because he disapproved of their strictly anti-American politics, their purging of the army and the increasingly brazen interference of incompetent clergymen in all sectors of the economy and politics.

Bani-Sadr politically supported the People's Mujahedin from June 1980 and allegedly arranged for their militia to get weapons from the army. The People's Mujahedin guarded his meetings against Hizbollah thugs and led a campaign together with Bani-Sadr and some dissatisfied clerics against the "dictatorship of the mullahs", whom they accused of betraying the democratic and social goals of the revolution in the interest of the bazaar merchants. The regime soon responded with open terror, especially after the war with Iraq broke out in September 1980. The Mujahedin's newspaper was banned, their leaders were persecuted, and their supporters and members were beaten, shot, arrested or executed.

Finally, Bani-Sadr's newspaper was closed down and oppositionist demonstrations prohibited, a decree the People's Mujahedin refused to obey. The direct confrontation came in June. According to the historian Ervand Abrahamian, the intention was that increasingly large demonstrations should set off a wave of strikes and possibly a military coup d'état against the mullahs' regime. At any rate, this presumably was Bani Sadr's intention. But when a demonstration with 500,000 participants was suppressed on June 20, with 50 demonstrators killed, nothing of the sort happened. Following the Iraqi assault, the Mujahedin's previous argument that democracy had to be subordinated to national defense was now turned against them. To make matters worse, the majority of the People's Fedayyin and the Tudeh, parties with substantial influence in the working class, agreed with this position and supported the regime.

Bani-Sadr was ousted the day after the demonstration, and an indescribable wave of terror was launched against the People's Mujahedin and left-wing organizations. Every month, hundreds and ultimately thousands were executed. The successful suppression of the People's Mujahedin was followed in 1983 by the physical extermination of the Tudeh party and the destruction of all democratic and social rights still left over from the revolution.

Masud Rajavi fled to Paris in 1981 and founded the National Resistance Council of Iran. The goal of the Council was to establish a Democratic Islamic Republic of Iran with Bani-Sadr as its president and Rajavi as the head of its provisional government. Initially, the People's Mujahedin strategy was that of unceasing assassinations of representatives of the Iranian regime. As of 1983, it shifted its focus to guerilla war in the Kurdish provinces after a large number of its fighters in central Iran fell victim to state repression.

At this time, numerous prominent personalities and organizations joined the Resistance Council, including Bani-Sadr, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran (DPKI), the secular-nationalistic Mossadeq followers of the National Democratic Front, and Stalinist groups. Modeling itself on the PLO, the Resistance Council vied for political recognition in the West. The left-wing and anti-imperialist rhetoric of the People's Mujahedin dwindled accordingly.

Once Iranian troops had prevailed in the Kurdish regions as well and hopes of the regime being toppled in the near future had dissipated, most of the other organizations left the Resistance Council by 1984. Rajavi reacted to the subsequent crisis of the People's Mujahedin with a purge of the Council's members, organizational restructuring and an "ideological revolution". The result was a strictly leader-oriented structure and a bizarre personality cult around Rajavi and his new wife Maryam which hardly differed from that of the Iranian regime with respect to Khomeini.

After the Mujahedin leadership had been officially declared a "terrorist organization" by the U.S. government in 1985 and expelled from Europe in 1986, it established its headquarters in Iraq, where in 1987 it created the National Liberation Army into which it placed the majority (several thousand people) of its members. Rajavi met with Saddam Hussein in June 1986. As this was a time when it was known that Iraq was using poison gas against Iranian troops and was receiving direct military aid from the USA, the meeting inevitably discredited the People's Mujahedin in Iran despite their continued assertions of political independence. The

fact that, despite this, they never lacked supporters and recruits was undoubtedly due to the brutal repression in Iran, the almost complete destruction of the Iranian left wing and to the Western media echoing for different reasons and out of shifting strategic perspectives the Mujahedin's claim that they were the only alternative and the relatively largest threat to the Iranian regime.

In its attempt to find powerful allies the organization moved increasingly to the right. When the US waged war against Iraq in 1990-91, the People's Mujahedin declared themselves "neutral". When the Iraqi regime subsequently suppressed popular uprisings in the north and south of the country with the tacit support of the US, they vacated their bases there so as "not to become involved in inner-Iraqi affairs". Not a critical word was spoken by the "democratic alternative", as the People's Mujahedin call themselves, against the unparalleled brutality of the governments which—in the case of the US—they were offering their services to, or which—in the case of Iraq—they were living off.

Instead, they echo imperialist propaganda against the existing Iranian regime—that it endangers Western interests through the construction of "weapons of mass destruction", the "exportation of fundamentalism and terrorism" and "opposition to the Israeli-Arab peace process". In the "platform of the National Resistance Council" (NRC) the following words are written: "The economic policy of the NRC is based on free market economy and the acknowledgement of national capitalism and the bazaar, private and personal property and investments The NRC considers the extension of relations to industrial nations to be essential for the reconstruction of the future Iran."

Due to unremitting lobbying, the NRC has continually been able to secure considerable support in the US Congress, and recently that of the majority of the US House of Representatives, which is controlled by the Republican Party right wing, and of the majority of the British Parliament. But, so far, the governments have been more inclined to place their bets on collaboration with a "moderate" wing of the Iranian regime.

The bitter animosity of the People's Mujahedin towards the most prominent representative of this "moderate" wing, Iranian president Khatami (whom they castigate as a "murderer"), cannot hide the fact that there is little that separates them politically from the so-called "reform wing" of the mullahs. Their bitterness appears to stem less from political differences than from the rancour of a jilted lover who vainly attempted to court the favors of the West and has now been cast aside in favor of a rival.

The real divide in Iran runs between the mass of the population, who live in bitter poverty and suppression, and a regime that has monopolized all sources of wealth and income. The vicious factional disputes between the "reformists" and "conservatives" are a reaction to the profound division of society which threatens both wings of the ruling elite. Whenever the protests from the base of society start to run their own course, the "reformists" and the "conservatives" quickly close ranks and demonstrate their fraternal relations.

The People's Mujahedin, in turn, stubbornly deny that there are any conflicts whatsoever within the regime. This seemingly radical stance reflects their indifference to social and democratic issues. The program of "free market economy" and "opening up to the West", which they and the regime "reformists" propagate alike, will intensify the social division of Iranian society and is thus incompatible with democracy and social equality.



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