

Mass trial of opposition group in Iran

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On November 11 and 12, court proceedings began in perhaps the biggest political trial since the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran in 1979. It is directed chiefly at the “Iran Freedom Movement” (IFM, *nehzat-e azadi-ye Iran*), a 40-year-old nationalist-religious group which supported the “reform movement” of president Mohammed Khatami, while demanding a more thorough-going liberalisation and pro-western orientation than Khatami himself.

The IFM was founded in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan, the first prime minister of the provisional government of the Islamic republic in 1979, until his forced resignation several months later. The IFM was more or less tolerated as a loyal liberal opposition by the Islamic regime up to last March, when it was banned. A total of 42 Freedom Movement members were arrested in police sweeps before the June presidential elections won by Khatami in a landslide.

In the first session of the trial before the Islamic Revolution Court, 31 IFM members face charges of “attempting to overthrow the regime and actions against state security”. In total, more than 60 members of the IFM and other organisations await trial. The sentences could be up to 10 years in prison or even the death penalty.

The trial has all the hallmarks of political terror to intimidate dissenting voices: reporters and even family members of the accused were not permitted to enter the courtroom or wait near the chamber. Four pro-reform members of the Majles (the Iranian parliament) who had asked to be allowed into court were also refused permission. On November 10, the justice ministry explained that the trial would be held behind closed doors because the “accusations in this case fall in the category of actions against national security... (and) publicising the hearings of the court would disrupt security and public order in the country.”

The statement added that the case includes remarks by some of the accused on the country’s top clerics, which “will hurt religious feelings” if they are broadcast, as well as remarks critical of several current and former officials of the Islamic republic. The small number of 10 lawyers allocated for all the accused have been warned not to talk to the press, so information is scarce.

Among the most prominent accused are a number of former ministers and officials who served in the provisional Bazargan government after the overthrow of the Shah’s regime, including Hashemi Sabaghian and 84-year-old Ahmad Sadr, who were respectively interior and justice ministers. Long-time opposition activist Fazlollah Salavati, who headed a now-banned newspaper in the city of Isfahan, as well as a former Tehran mayor, Mohammad Tavasoli, will also be tried, as well as Abolfazl Bazargan, the son of Mehdi Bazargan, and at least two other members of the Bazargan family.

President Khatami, who has previously insisted that the judiciary is independent, despite the courts having jailed scores of his own supporters and banned most of the papers supporting him, has repeatedly protested against the IFM arrests. In April he said the arrests were “not in the interest of the political system and the people.” More recently, he described the IFM trial as unconstitutional.

Other representatives of the reform wing have acknowledged that the trial was a political attack against them. They demanded that, since it was a political and not a national security related case, it should be held in public and in front of a jury. “They deserve the rights of any political defendant, including an open court so people in Iran can judge for themselves,” said a statement from the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF), the largest pro-Khatami group, published in newspapers on November 11. “Otherwise, public opinion would have no choice than to acquit them and condemn those who created this case.”

The IIPF is a pro-Islamic group. When it held its second congress in September, it explicitly distanced itself from any form of “radicalism” and “lay liberalism” and emphasised its commitment to the pillar of theocracy, the *velayet-e faqih* (rule of the religious jurist) and “moderation”.

The move against the IFM by the judiciary, controlled by the hard-line clerics, signals a further escalation of the virtual civil war that has been raging within the Iranian ruling elite for some time now. The “nationalist-religious” political current represented by the IFM is deeply rooted in a section of the Iranian bourgeoisie. It has played an active role, or was at least tolerated, under all the successive

regimes that ruled the country.

Under the Shah in the 1940s, Mehdi Bazargan (1905-1995) played a leading role in the formation of the Engineers' Association and the Islamic Student Association, which later became the IFM's youth organisation. The Shah tolerated the activities of Bazargan, who served as dean of the Technical College in Tehran University since the late 1940s, to counter the spread of Marxism among students.

In 1951, after the elected nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadegh had nationalised Iran's Oil, Bazargan served as head of the newly formed National Iranian Oil Company. After 1953, when Mossadegh's government was ousted by the Shah in a military coup with the help of British and American secret services and the Islamic clergy, the Shah continued to tolerate Bazargan's activities, while the workers' movement was cruelly oppressed.

In the mid-1950s Bazargan wrote a number of pamphlets arguing that science and Islam were compatible. The IFM, founded in 1961, was tolerated up to 1963, when all independent political tendencies were suppressed. As a social base it had the older generation of the modern middle class, made up of professional workers, technocrats and civil servants. It advocated nationalism, a capitalist free-market economy, a degree of integration in the capitalist world economy and therefore some form of relations with the west including the US. Islam, it argued, should serve to mobilise the people for the "national interest" (i.e., the interests of the bourgeoisie) without wasting too much time with social issues and, in particular, should not question the class divisions of society. This hostility towards the working class led Bazargan to support Khomeini, who made him his first prime minister in 1979.

Khomeini led a movement of low and mid-ranking clerics, who in turn represented the interests of the more traditional middle class, the bazaar merchants and traders, who felt threatened by the world market. Through mosques, religious schools and other social institutions financed by the bazaar, the clergy was able to maintain some influence among the most backward, impoverished and uneducated sections of urban and rural poor.

As soon as key positions of the state apparatus were under Khomeini's control, he broke his alliance with Bazargan and the liberals who opposed a complete break of relations with the US and also the involvement of incompetent clerics in all aspects of politics, economy and society. Even after his ousting, Bazargan nevertheless continued to serve as member of the Majles for some time.

The conflict between elements of the bourgeoisie oriented to the domestic market, supported by traditional sections of the middle class and open fascist elements, and those

elements of the bourgeoisie oriented to the world market and an opening to the west has formed the background of the conflict between reformers and hard-line clerics for some time. The more the political basis of the clerics has deteriorated—reflected in the massive election victories for the reform elements—the more aggressively have they employed the legal and police apparatus which they control against their opponents.

For their part the reform wing was not prepared to openly take on the clerics, fearing the eruption of a mass movement that would take up urgent social issues and explode the reformists' limited programme of "moderate Islamism". The reformers are well aware that their pro-capitalist politics oriented to opening the country up to the world market is incompatible with the resolution of burning social questions.

The military intervention of US imperialism in neighbouring Afghanistan has sharpened the contradictions between the reform wing and the clerical wing of the Iranian establishment. On the one hand the regime tries to maintain its traditional pose of anti-Americanism and has condemned US air strikes in Afghanistan. Some right-wing British and US newspapers even alleged secret talks between Iranian and Taliban officials about aid directed against America. On the other hand Iran works together with US forces on the ground, who collaborate with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, of which Iran is a major backer. Just last Monday at a conference over Afghanistan, the Iranian and the US foreign ministers shook hands, the first handshake between cabinet ministers from the two countries in over 20 years.

The hard-line clerics clearly fear losing out in this situation. Supporters of Khatami alleged that the trial against the IFM, which started when the president was in New York for a UN conference, was aimed at undermining him and his pro-western agenda. The trial could be a prelude to a wider attack against the supposedly moderate wing of the regime and the establishment of open dictatorship.

At the same time, in the long run, the trial destroys a safety valve for the regime to keep popular dissatisfaction under control. A relative of the accused IFM members recalled the words of the late Bazargan when he stood trial in 1963: "We are the last who continue to struggle politically within the framework of the constitution. We expect the head of this court to convey this point to his superiors."



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