

Social tensions escalate conflicts within Iranian regime

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Under increasing pressure from the US government, which has classified Iran as part of its “axis of evil”, there has been a recent escalation of conflicts within the Islamic regime. Behind these conflicts lie profound class divisions inside Iranian society, and the fact that not only the conservatives around spiritual leader Ali Khamenei, but also the so-called reformers led by state President Mohammed Khatami, have lost any broad popular support.

In recent months the governmental right wing had gone on the offensive. Liberal newspapers were banned, journalists and intellectuals locked up and whipped, cultural meetings suppressed and youth terrorised by religious militias for all sorts of “immoral behaviour”—from having parties, to holding hands or wearing headscarves secured “too loosely”.

This repression met with no real opposition on the part of the state president. However, at the end of August Khatami gave a press conference in which he turned on the conservatives with uncharacteristic sharpness. While previously he had limited himself to general moralising over the necessity of democracy, patience and the harmful nature of extremism and intolerance, he now attacked virtually all of the important institutions controlled by his right-wing opponents.

He pointed out that the judiciary banned newspapers and jailed intellectuals behind closed doors, without a jury and unconstitutionally. The media—with the state radio and television all in the hands of the right-wing hardliners—had repeatedly published the accusations levelled against those accused, but never printed the arguments of the defence.

Khatami also criticised the convictions delivered at the end of July against the “Liberation movement of Iran” (Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran, NAI). The nationalist religious movement, which was founded 40 years ago, was broken up last year following mass arrests and the subsequent conviction of many of its members sentenced to long spells in prison. Khatami claimed that he had tried to control the courts, as was his constitutional duty, but “they never wanted to listen.” Corresponding draft laws had been hindered by the Guardian Council, a sort of constitutional court which is dominated by conservative clerics.

The president continued: “Until now I had tried to act delicately to reach a solution through dialogue and consensus.... Unfortunately, I have not had much success. My repeated warnings over violations of constitutional rights have gone unheeded.”

He announced that his government would introduce a law to parliament awarding more power to the president. A law to limit the powers of the Guardian Councils had already been introduced. The parliament is dominated by supporters of Khatami. “The Guardian Council should not reject the bills,” he said, “because they are logical and none of them are against the Constitution or the Islamic law, unless it intends to violate the Constitution.”

Even spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—Iran’s highest political authority, according to the Iranian constitution—was challenged by Khatami. Khatami said with his proposed draft law he only wanted to occupy a position such as that held by Khamenei himself when he

occupied the post of president under Khomeini in the eighties. Khatami indicated in a barely veiled manner that the conservative “beloved leader” should keep his nose out of politics in future: “Our leader has heavy responsibilities. He should not be expected to intervene to settle every little problem. We have a parliament, laws and regulations.”

Khamenei reacted with the barely disguised threat to dissolve parliament or dismiss the government. In front of a gathering of Friday prayer preachers the Ayatollah announced should any of the heads of the three state authorities depart from the correct path he would stand in their way.

As Khatami’s press conference was under way, the parliament passed two laws representing a fierce challenge to the conservative clerics. These laws, which must now be checked by the Guardian Council, allow women the rights to divorce and abortion. Prior to the parliamentary motions, 150 parliamentary deputies had passed a resolution criticising the judiciary for its undemocratic handling of the “Liberation movement.”

The election of Khatami was the result of a broad desire for democratic reforms. Under conditions where the only candidates for the election were those ratified by the Guardian Council, Khatami seemed to be the best guarantor for a policy aimed at loosening somewhat the dictatorship of the conservative clerics. In his five years in power, however, Khatami has proved to be incapable of fulfilling the hopes invested in him. He revealed himself not as a fighter for democracy, but rather as a left fig leaf for the ruling clerics, with the task of intercepting and neutralising the democratic opposition.

Far more than their right-wing opponents, Khatami and his supporters fear a genuine popular mobilisation for democratic rights. Protesting workers and students—who have been beaten up by the police and militia, then arrested, locked up, tortured and murdered—were denounced by Khatami as “hooligans”, “traitors” and “provocateurs”, even when they had taken to the streets bearing his picture and shouting his name, as in July 1999.

Khatami’s most important “weapon” is a threat directed at the conservatives that he would resign his post and leave the conservatives to the anger of the masses. The biggest party in the Iranian parliament, the reformist Musharakat, led by Khatami’s brother Reza, also threatened to withdraw from parliament at the end of July should the conservatives continue to refuse to abide by the law and accept the constitution.

The Musharakat has five ministers in Khatami’s government and a total of 130 of the 290 parliamentary deputies. They called for the sovereignty of the duly elected parliamentary representatives as opposed to non-elected institutions—such as the Guardian Council, Expediency Council and judiciary. They did nothing, however, to follow up their words with action. Like the president, their main concern was to prevent the struggle for democratic rights from endangering the government of the Mullahs as a whole.

The latest offensive on the part of the reformers is also a result of their fear of a mass mobilisation. In order to deter any disturbances, Khatami had emphasised that political and social dissatisfaction was great and that

it was necessary to respect the rights of the people. In this respect, he and his supporters have become so discredited over a short period of time that they are now barely in a position to be able to control outbreaks of protest and discontent.

This was evident on July 9 when demonstrations took place to commemorate those who had fallen in the bloody suppression of students three years earlier. Iran's biggest student organisation, the Office for Consolidation of Unity (OCU), which is close to Khatami, refused to support the demonstration. The interior ministry, which is dominated by reformist elements, also took the measure of banning all demonstrations. Nevertheless, several thousand protesters took to the streets.

According to similar reports in the French, British and American press, which all sympathise with Khatami, it was possible for supporters of the overthrown Shah to exercise some influence over the demonstrations. Via satellite and the Internet, Iran's monarchist opposition in exile had been able to call for participation on the demonstration. The protests were broken up by police and militias composed of religious fanatics employing the sort of brutality which is commonplace in Iran. Hundreds of participants were injured and arrested.

One day later the resignation of a high-ranking and well-known cleric who had been personally appointed by Khomeini, Ayatollah Jalaledin Taheri, caused a considerable sensation. He attacked the gulf which existed between the rich and poor, as well as rampant corruption, and spoke of the "failure of the political structure". Reports of his resignation were widely censored.

A week later, 15,000 workers demonstrated in Teheran against the policies of privatisation and deregulation pursued by the Khatami government. The demonstrators were attacked by the police, who employed tear gas and truncheons and beat and arrested a number of the protesters.

The American government has been at work to further intensify the crisis of the Iranian government and use the situation to impose a regime friendly to US interests.

In January, US President Bush had accused Iran of being a supporter of international terrorism and forming an "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea—a barely disguised threat of war. In July the *Washington Post* reported, on the basis of information from high ranking government circles, that the president and his advisors had decided to put an end to the policy of collaboration with Khatami and the reformers—a policy which had been introduced under former president Bill Clinton. The article quoted sources saying that the reformers were "too weak and ineffective". Instead the attempt was to be made to make direct contact with exponents of people's rights in Iran.

On July 12, just three days after the anti-government demonstrations and the resignation of Taheri, Bush made a statement declaring his solidarity with the demonstrators and sharply attacking the Iranian government. Despite the results of parliamentary and presidential elections in Iran, Bush claimed that the Iranian leadership sought "to obstruct reform while reaping unfair benefits".

Bush stated that a "long history of friendship" existed between the US and the Iranian people, and that "As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America." According to the *Washington Post*, the statement was broadcast in Iran over the Voice of America radio.

The position of Zalmay Khalilzad, who is responsible for Iran on the US National Security Council, was even clearer. He gave an interview to Voice of America in Persian which was also broadcast in Iran and expanded on the statement made by Bush. Later he told the right-wing American think tank, the Washington Institute for Middle East Policy, that the US supports neither Khatami nor Khamenei, but rather "those who want freedom, human rights, democracy" ... "to support the Iranian people in their quest to decide their own destiny".

According to magazine, report when in asked did not deny that the conclusion inevitably arising from his remarks meant the overthrow of the current government.

There are clear indications that the US government is relying on the return of those political layers who were overthrown and forced into exile by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Shah of Iran, notorious for the brutality of his rule and his readiness to employ measures of torture, up until his overthrow was the closest ally of the US in the region.

At the end of August the Associated Press reported in glowing terms on Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed Shah, who lives in exile in America. He was said to be planning a non-violent revolution and receiving calls, e-mails and faxes every day from supporters in Iran.

In light of the absence of anything which could be regarded as a genuine democratic opposition, it appears that Pahlavi has been able to pose as a shining representative of a modern, democratic western way of life, thereby winning some influence among more privileged layers of Iranian society. His supporters run their own satellite channel, National Iranian Television, in Los Angeles, sending a professionally produced news programme to Iran, as well as many Persian pop music videos featuring TV journalists with shaved faces and no head coverings. In addition, in many Iranian cities there are Internet cafes where young people seek an alternative to official religious bigotry and repression.

It is not easy to estimate exactly how much influence the monarchist forces have. One can be certain, however, that whatever support there is, it is not based on the yearning for a return to the tyranny of the Shah, but rather on the desire for individual freedom and a western style of life. Nearly two-thirds of the Iranian population is under the age of 25 has no conscious memories of the period of the Shah. The inability of the reformers to make any improvements in the living conditions and rights of the population—and the lack of any socialist opposition on the part of the working class—has created a vacuum which these reactionary forces are seeking to exploit.

Growing pressure, both from inside and outside the country, has intensified the conflict between the two wings of the government to the point of civil war. While the reformers are attempting to use democratic rhetoric to polish up their credibility amongst the people, conservative circles are discussing whether to call a state of emergency.

A week after the speech by President Bush, the leadership of the paramilitary "revolutionary guards" (Pasdaran) issued a barely concealed threat to the reformers that they would not stand by idly and accept "a tendency, perhaps formerly with the Islamic revolution and that infiltrated the state, which seeks to separate the government from Islam and create a secular regime in line with the interests of the enemies of the Islamic Republic."

In terms of foreign policy, however, both wings are attempting to cuddle up to the US. This may at first glance appear to be a contradiction, but in fact corresponds to the characteristic behaviour of all national bourgeois regimes which react to popular pressure at home by seeking the support of imperialism.

Behind the ritual condemnations of US foreign policy made by both Khatami and the conservatives lie definite signals pointing towards appeasement.

Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of the influential Expediency Council and one of the richest and most powerful men in the country, is regarded as a key figure amongst the conservatives. He stated: "We tell the Americans to put aside their arrogant behaviour, then this nation could start dialogue with you and talk to you."

In New York, the Iranian government has named a new UN ambassador, who himself acknowledges that his task is to establish better contacts with the US government. According to an Arab newspaper, a contact office is to be opened in Dubai with the same aim. Such political initiatives are unthinkable without the consent of Khamenei, who according to the

constitution has the last word on all issues relating to foreign policy and security.

The government's position regarding US war plans against Iraq are just as ambiguous. In public both fractions inside the government vehemently reject such plans, but in practice there are numerous contacts to the point of open collaboration.

Last Monday the Iranian foreign minister urgently called upon Iraq to rapidly readmit UN weapons inspectors—a demand which has also been raised in the US and Europe in order to establish a pretext for war.

With the express agreement of Iran, the Iraqi opposition group “Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq” (SCIRI), based in Teheran, participated in talks between Iraqi opposition organisations and the American government and the CIA in Washington. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the SCIRI spoke forcefully for American military strikes against “sensitive and important centres of the Ba’ath regime”. This initiative would also be impossible without the approval of Iran’s “leader” Khamenei.

Iran has vigorously rejected any delivery of armaments to Baghdad. On the other hand, it has a secret agreement with Israel, which delivers weapons to Iran. This again became clear two weeks ago when customs officials in the German city of Hamburg confiscated tank parts from Israel bound for Iran.

In addition, fighters who have fled to Iran from Afghanistan have been sent back. In the middle of August the government of Saudi Arabia made known that Iran had delivered 16 Saudi Al Qaeda fighters to the country. A banned newspaper of the reformers, *Emruz*, reported on its web site that Iran had returned a total of 400 Al Qaeda refugees from Afghanistan to their countries of origin, mainly from Pakistan, Kuwait, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.



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