

Thousands protest against Iranian government

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For over a week, several hundred students have taken part in daily demonstrations in Teheran against the Iranian Islamic government. The students were joined by thousands of city residents, who became embroiled in battles with the police and fanatical groups of thugs loyal to the government.

The demonstrations were originally directed against the privatisation of the universities and the introduction of fees for students, but they were rapidly joined by broader sections of the population. Inhabitants of the city who joined the protests deliberately blocked traffic, while car drivers beeped their horns in a show of support for the students. Residents allowed students caught up in the fighting to take refuge in their homes. Later, several thousands also demonstrated in other Iranian cities.

According to recent reports, 140 demonstrators have been arrested, with many injured. The police used truncheons and tear gas, while paramilitary groups of religious fanatics attacked the protesters, including women, with metal chains. On Saturday, right-wing thugs, supporters of the religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, overran student dormitories and attacked students with chains, metal bars and knives. Fifty students were wounded in the course of this single assault, and a further two dozen disappeared soon after the attack. Fearful that the extreme brutality of the militias could provoke wider dissent and, under circumstance in which the state forces were coming off the worst in some fighting, the police arrested a handful of members of the religious militias.

“The student protests express a widespread popular mood,” the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper commented. The causes of dissatisfaction are immediately apparent: poverty and unemployment, economic stagnation, permanent official bullying and strict Islamic laws affecting every aspect of daily life. But as the paper continued: “There is no party or structure which could

serve to fuse the general discontent into coordinated action.”

The political slogans became visibly more radical. For the first time, such chants as “Death to Khamenei” and “Khatami, resign” could be heard on Teheran streets. Last Monday, 250 intellectuals published a letter in which they questioned the basis of the theocratic system of the “Rule of the religious clerics.” “The people and their elected representatives have the right to supervise, criticise and remove those from power with whom they are dissatisfied,” the letter read. The letter also stated, “To elevate an individual to a position of absolute power is a clear heresy against God and a clear affront against human dignity.” Such comments are punishable in today’s Iran with nothing less than a prison sentence.

It is evident that the faction of “liberal reformers” around state president Mohamed Khatami are completely discredited, having failed to realise any of their promises of increased democracy—despite their holding overwhelming majorities in all elected institutions.

This process was already apparent in local elections in late February. Voter participation slumped to just 25 percent (12 percent in Teheran) compared with 64 percent in similar elections held in 1999. In most city councils, the “reformers” lost their posts to conservative opponents.

Following the US offensive in Iraq, 100 deputies from the Iranian parliament, which is still dominated by the “reform” faction, wrote an urgent letter to the religious “leader” of the republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They pleaded with him to allow democratic reforms in order to rescue the existing system and prevent Iran from suffering the same fate as the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. State president Khatami himself responded by issuing a general ban on publication of the letter.

Later, the end came for two draft laws passed by parliament in March that were seen as Khatami’s last card. One law aimed to take away the conservative-

dominated “Council of Guardians” veto power to bar candidates it does not like from participating in elections. This law was particularly significant given parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring of 2004. The conservatives have made no bones about their intention of using these elections to mount a counter-offensive to regain the majority in parliament.

The second piece of legislation was aimed at expanding the powers of the state president, allowing him to punish violations of the constitution and revise decisions made by the conservative-dominated courts, such as the banning of newspapers and the imprisonment of intellectuals.

Khatami had tied his political fate to this legislative package and, as he has frequently done before, threatened to resign should the measures not be approved. Deputies had also threatened to resign en masse should the draft laws be blocked. In fact, nothing of the sort took place following the anticipated decision by the Council of Guardians to veto the drafts. Instead, Khatami indicated he was prepared to seek a compromise with the “esteemed Council of Guardians.” In a letter to the speaker of the Iranian parliament, he explained the aim of the two drafts: “In this sensitive situation where ‘seditious hands are at work’ consolidating the link between the nation, government and the system has immense importance.”

Khatami’s response reveals the dilemma of the “reformers.” The liberal reforms they are seeking in order to rein in the influence of the mullahs can only be achieved through a mobilisation of broad layers of the working masses. The reforms are to be directed against the domination of privileged clerics supported by the layer of so-called bazaar handlers, rich merchants and traders who profit under the protection of the Islamic regime. These layers fear any liberalisation and opening up of the country, which would rapidly and radically challenge the basis of their privileged position.

At the same time, the “reformers” fear any mobilisation of the masses. Their own perspective envisages a programme of extensive deregulation and privatisation of the economy, which will only deepen the horrendous gulf between rich and poor in Iran and prove deeply unpopular. It is no accident that the trigger for the latest protests was moves towards the privatisation of the universities and the introduction of student fees.

The aggressive activities of the US in the Middle East, which are increasingly directed against Iran, have intensified the reform wing’s dilemma. Now their right-wing opponents can brand any form of criticism or opposition as an expression of American subversion.

Khamenei also denounced the demonstrators as “adventurers” and “American mercenaries” for whom Iran would show no mercy. At the same time, the second most prominent ranking conservative after Khamenei, Hashemi Rafsanjani, called upon the US to be “logical” and carry out discussions with Iran instead of “bullying” the country. He indicated that Iran could use its influence amongst Islamic groups in Palestine and Iraq to bring the situation in those countries under control and in line with the interests of the United States.

The *Financial Times* commented: “Reformists close to Mohammad Khatami, the elected president who holds limited powers, suspect Mr. Rafsanjani and other conservatives want to suppress the movement for change at home while trying to make a deal with the US.”

The Bush government’s pressure on Iran has increased considerably since the stationing of American troops in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iraq. President Bush welcomed the student protests and enthusiastically described them as the “beginning of new free Iran.” Secretary of State Colin Powell made similar remarks.

For some time, private Persian-language TV stations, mainly situated in the wealthier neighbourhoods of the capital, have been played an important role. They broadcast programs produced in Los Angeles and transmitted by satellite that call for participation in anti-government demonstrations. Most of these channels are controlled by right-wing monarchists whose aim is to put in power Reza Pahlavi, the son of the shah of Iran, who was deposed in 1979. In common with the rest of the right-wing monarchist movement in Iran, Pahlavi lacks any real popular support.

The backers of these private stations also include Douglas Feith, the US under secretary of defence for policy, who is closely linked to the influential pro-Bush American Enterprise Institute as well as to the pro-Israeli lobbyists in Washington. A recent bill introduced by Republican senator Sam Brownback calls for the US government to provide official funding for the satellite channels to the tune of US\$50 million.



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