

An interview with an Iranian activist on arrests of left-wing students

28 January 2008

On January 15, the Iranian government arrested 10 students involved in left-wing protests against both the Iranian political establishment and US war plans. This followed the arrest of more than 30 students in December. (See “Iranian government intensifies crackdown on left-wing opposition.”)

Before the recent arrests, the WSWs spoke to an individual in Tehran familiar with these developments to discuss the political and social situation in Iran. For security reasons, we are withholding this individual’s name.

WSWS: Could you describe the present conditions and situation faced by the arrested students?

Answer: At least 30 students have been arrested and held for 40 days. They have not been allowed to meet with their lawyers or their relatives. We know that some of them are on a hunger strike, and some of them have been able to have some brief phone conversations with their families. Some of them are definitely under physical and psychological pressure.

WSWS: What do you mean by “physical pressure”?

A: This is not from an authoritative source, but we have heard that some students on several occasions were referred to the prison hospital. We think that they are mostly under psychological pressure, but beating is something normal to make prisoners cooperate with the interrogators. One student has reportedly attempted suicide and was sent to the prison hospital.

WSWS: Has there been any official acknowledgement that these students are being held? Has the government provided a reason for the arrests?

A: The government has issued a statement that they have arrested “Marxist” students, and the notorious Evin Prison has acknowledged that the students are there. Being Marxist in Iran is itself a great crime, and is considered heresy against Islam. These students have been arrested on the vague charge that they have committed acts against national security. Almost all of them are kept in solitary confinement, and that part of solitary confinement at Evin Prison is run by the Revolutionary Guards [Sepah]. The students are probably under pressure to confess that they are in contact

with dissident parties currently organized outside of Iran. All of these parties are declared illegal and anti-governmental. Any affiliation with them could imply great punishment.

Inside Iran, we face many obstacles to mobilize protests for the release of these students. The Security Ministry has threatened families that if they engage in protests, they will also be arrested. The father of one of those arrested, who is very active in giving interviews with independent media inside and outside of Iran, has been summoned to the Information Ministry and has been threatened by phone. Even the families are not in a position to gather and organize.

What we have been able to do so far is to stage a demonstration at Tehran University demanding their release, and we have organized a petition-gathering campaign as leverage for the release of the students.

Many working class activists in Iran—for example, the industrial workers at Asalooye Petrochemical Complex and Autoworkers in “IranKhodro”—have installed banners in support of the students at their workplace. There were some unions that have also declared solidarity with these students. Although those who support these students are not from formal organizations—there are no independent working class unions in Iran—semi-official unions that are not recognized by the government have voiced their opposition to the arrests.

WSWS: What would you say is behind this latest wave of government repression?

A: The government is faced with internal domestic as well as international crises, and so it does not tolerate any opposition to its policies. It does not even tolerate some activists that are closely associated with the so-called Reformists who do not pose a threat to the political system in Iran. Some of them are in prison as well. The reason that they did not do this before is that, first, the Islamic regime was in a situation where it was in a confrontation with the US, and it tolerated leftist activities, which were at the same time against US imperialism. This has become less important for the government recently, after the publication of the US National Intelligence Estimate report.

The most important issue, however, was the movement of these students toward a more independent organization. This year, for the first time after the repression of the leftist groups in 1980s, the Radical Left held a separate demonstration inside campuses in which they clearly delineated their group from the Reformist tendencies. In Iran, there are no student, or working class, or any other independent organizations. That is why it is very critical for the government to suppress and arrest these students. The government recently crushed a union of bus workers that had at least 9,000 members and many others as sympathizers. This happened two years ago.

WSWS: Does the move toward the formation of independent organizations among students reflect a change in the consciousness of students?

A: Yes, definitely. The first sign of changes among students was the emergence of the so-called “Critical Left.” Some members of this group adhered to the Frankfurt School of thought, and some others had Reformist tendencies, believing that capitalism should come first before any socialist movement. This was basically a Menshevik position. Later, in the past two years, the Critical Left was weakened and the “Radical Left” gained influence and established itself as the dominant tendency.

WSWS: What explains this leftward movement of students?

A: The change in the attitude of students has reflected the radicalization of society and the contradictions that have developed. At the same time as the Critical Left and Radical Left emerged, you see the formation of unofficial groups among workers—illegal, but still active. You even see the reformist movements developing—for example, the campaign for the equal rights for women, which had right-wing character in fact. This shows that there are contradictions within Iran that are finding reflection in different forms.

A second reason that the left emerged and gained support was that the Reformists failed to carry out their promises. Students have become very disillusioned with the Reformists. As a third reason, it is necessary to see this in a global context. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, left politics suffered a setback. In recent years, there has been a global re-emergence of the left. This was another reason.

A pamphlet by Keith Jones

WSWS: Has the economic situation also played a role?

A: When the Reformists came to power, they presented themselves as a solution to Iran’s social and economic problems. What happened in reality during the eight years they were in power was the introduction and development of neo-liberal policies. That furthered the gap between the rich and the poor, and the economic situation deteriorated. That is another reason why such tendencies grew. It is necessary

to see them in the context of an increasing gap between rich and poor in Iran.

WSWS: What do you mean by the “global re-emergence of the left”?

A: We do not consider the Soviet Union to have been a socialist system. However, the Soviet Union was closely associated in the minds of the people with an alternative to capitalism. So when it collapsed and the right declared the end of history, many people moved away from socialist ideas. It discredited socialism in the eyes of the people. If you introduced yourself to someone as a socialist, they would say, ‘But the Soviet Union collapsed. It does not work.’ But this is changing today. People are more receptive to socialist ideas.

WSWS: How do you evaluate the danger of war against Iran today?

A: Based on the NIE report, the tension has subsided, but this does not mean that there is no prospect for war. The region is full of tensions, and Iran is not a conventional system of capitalism, and it does not work smoothly in the international system. The US tries to bring a system that works well within the system of capitalism. We cannot ignore the efforts of the Israeli lobbies that may lead to irrational actions by the US. Also, the US is definitely trying to change the political map of the Middle East in its interests. That is why we do not see the threat of war as something that has passed.

WSWS: How do you see the way forward for students and workers in Iran?

A: The first thing is that we need an independent organization of the working class and students. The workers themselves are following the developments in universities very carefully. The Islamic regime is doing its best to wipe out this emerging socialist movement. Because of that, it is very essential that all actions that are possible in the international arena be carried out.

The situation around the globe for the emergence for socialism is better than ever before, an attribute of modern capitalism. We definitely embrace any cooperation between students and workers in Iran and the US.



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