

An interview with an Iranian student activist

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In December and January, the Iranian government arrested students involved in left-wing protests against the Iranian political establishment and US war plans against Iran. The International Students for Social Equality, the student wing of the Socialist Equality Party, organized a demonstration on February 16 to protest their incarceration and demand their immediate release.

The WSWS recently contacted an individual in Tehran familiar with these developments to discuss the political and social situation in Iran. For security reasons, we are withholding this person's name.

Q: Could you give us an update on the fate of the students who were arrested and their treatment while in prison?

A: Those who were arrested have been deprived of their ability to continue studying. They are under control by security forces. They have to report to them, they check them by telephone, and they have open legal cases. Also, their families are under investigation. The students and their families are under great pressure. First, they are suspended from university studies. Also, some families have had to put up their property as bail for the release of their children; moreover, most of the families were unable to pay for the bail and have had to borrow from their relatives or acquaintances. In such cases, the threat of confiscation by government and juridical power always exists. In Iran, it is the norm that trials are not held shortly after they are freed. They can be in a suspended state for one or two years, before their cases are finally heard. This is constant psychological pressure that is designed to force them into not engaging in political activity.

Q: How many people still face trials?

A: There are 40-50 people who are waiting for their legal procedures, and they are keeping them in limbo.

Q: What are they charged with?

A: The charges are different for different people. The most common include measures against national security; advocating against the Islamic regime; membership in Marxist groups; support or membership in groups or parties in opposition to the Islamic Republic; and holding illegal demonstrations or gatherings.

Q: What sort of sentences may they be subjected to?

A: It should be understood that these are not normal legal cases as they may appear from the outside. This is not at all a legal procedure. Those who define the sentences are the security and intelligence organizations. The charges will probably be dropped for those who decide to be no longer politically active, but not completely even in this case. However, definitely the sentences could include suspended sentences or prison time. If the students are released, they will be forced to agree not to engage in political activity.

Q: Could you say something about how the students were treated

in prison?

A: There were two waves of arrests. One was 40 days before the second. Those who were arrested earlier were under intense physical and psychological pressures, which actually caused a backlash in society and from human rights organizations. In response, those arrested in the second wave were not treated as badly.

Q: What sort of methods were used?

A: Those arrested in the first wave were held from 40 to 60 days in solitary confinement. They were prone to battering and beating, from slapping in the face and punching in the face or other parts of the body, to more severe measures such as penetrating sharp objects into the ears, and beating to such an extent that it leads to internal bleeding, bleeding in the kidneys. For a few arrested people terrible electrical shocks have been used. Some of the students have been stripped while beaten in order to be mentally and sexually oppressed.

Q: And the aim was to get them to confess that they were members of organizations?

A: Yes, it was mostly intended to get them to confess that they were members of those organizations named by the interrogators. In particular cases, they had applied electrical shocks and a particular torture technique in which the hands are bound behind the back and the prisoner is hung from the ceiling. The beatings continued for a long period of say, 10 hours, with intervals of interrogation.

Q: What has been the reaction on campuses to these arrests?

A: The crackdown on these students had a great impact on the general atmosphere of the universities and to some extent in Iranian society. After the intense crackdown in the 1980s, following the revolution, the left was marginalized. Now it is again recognized as a player in Iranian politics and society. After the news was publicized, many groups in provincial cities without any prior connection with these students, introduced themselves as part of the Equality and Freedom Seeking Students [*Azady khah o Barabary talab*].

In some of these provinces, we had contacts there already before the arrests. Because of the situation, they were in a better position to attract more students, so we saw a growth. In some other provinces, entirely new groups have formed.

In the case that the Equality and Freedom Seeking Students do not again continue their ordinary activities in universities, this kind of crackdown might have a negative impact on ordinary students who would distance themselves from the left because they are concerned about the consequences. We have to rebuild the connection with students on campuses, and also rebuild links to activists involved in the working class and with women's issues.

Q: Would you say there is a new political radicalization on campuses and in society as a whole?

A: It would be an exaggeration to say that the society in general was informed of what happened. But still, a considerable portion of society was able to see the news that Marxist students were arrested. Their reactions might be different. Some might say, "Again Marxists are emerging," whereas before that they simply neglected any left tendencies.

Things were made more difficult by the fact that we do not have an effective media. It is important to note that media like US Voice of America actually ignored and refused to publicize and broadcast the arrests in the early days. Later, after the events were publicized on campuses, they could no longer neglect it. However, they tried to avoid referring to the Marxist and socialist basis of the students. They invited people, commentators, who were liberal students who fled the country, who tried to present the left students as the same as the liberals and refer to them under some general terms such as "university activists" to conceal their real radical and Marxist direction, and to use that against the Iranian government, without referring to the real politics of the arrested students.

Q: Beyond this immediate event, what is your evaluation of the political and economic situation in Iran now?

A: The economic situation is highly critical in Iran. Food prices have risen dramatically in the past several months. Two or three weeks ago, in one of the municipalities in South Tehran, there were riots over the high price of rice, the staple food among Iranians. The price of land and housing has also gone up dramatically recently, which has added to the upheaval in the country.

Over the course of the past year, there has been a militarization of society in general. Not only in politics, but also in social spheres of life the government has launched many attacks on freedoms, including a plan called the "social security plan," in which there are some particularly trained forces that are attacking women and arresting them for not having the proper veil.

The Iranian political structure is trying to impose itself so that the world bourgeoisie accepts it as a conventional system. This has led the government to expand its grip of power and control in Iranian society, and into the private lives of the citizens and into every single social sphere of society. The tensions with the global bourgeoisie and the sanctions embargo have led the government to extend its hegemony into both private and public affairs.

The most important aspect is the economy in determining this conflict. The solution to this situation rests upon the economy. In order to convince the global bourgeoisie to accept the Iranian regime, there is no way but to turn into a conventional capitalist system. The sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie who now have control over the government do not have the legitimacy to carry through these changes through parliamentary forces, so they have to resort to brute force.

In recent years, they have launched an attack on wages, and have promoted policies that have led to the deterioration of labor conditions and laws that formerly protected workers. They are also creating a legal structure that secures investment, which in this particular case is at odds with some particular sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie, particularly the clerical system.

Looking back to the reformist era, you see that for example Rasfajani initiated the restructuring of the economy and upheld the banner of neo-liberal reforms, which his successor Khatami also carried out. At the same time, they were holding the banner of nationalism, as opposed to what is now referred to as fundamentalism, represented by Ahmadinejad. Now the situation has changed. Now the revolutionary guard and the other sections that are referred to as fundamentalists are holding the banner of nationalism and are trying to carry out the neo-liberal reforms. The difference is that their foreign policy was different. The reformists were favoring the surrender of Iran's economy to global capitalism. Now the other faction is taking a more assertive role in the region.

Q: Could you say more about the situation facing the working class in Iran?

A: The inflation in Iran is almost 20 percent according to what the government says, and it is the fourth highest inflation rate in the world. Because of the economic situation, many companies, many factories, have cut their employees, many workers have lost their jobs. There is a broader assault. The rate of strikes and protests is increasing dramatically. In Khuzestan, there was a larger protest, in which many people from the city joined, and there were clashes with the police in which many people were injured. Iran is on the verge of an explosion.

There is an interesting distinction between the political struggles during the period of the reformers and what has happened with Ahmadinejad. The election of Ahmadinejad was a change, an accommodation to the changing situation in Iran. The economic situation, the class struggles, the income inequalities, were becoming dominant at that time, which led to the populist agenda of Ahmadinejad. During Khatami, most demonstrations and clashes with police were around democratic issues, freedom of the press, etc. Most struggles are not centered on these demands now. Economic issues are coming more to the fore. However, there is no organization yet. Although the objective situation is very favorable to these struggles, their form is spontaneous riots, which are prone to repression. The government does not even tolerate other forms of organization, such as unions.



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