Tensions mount within Iran's ruling establishment

Bill Van Auken
21 July 2009

The speech delivered by Iran's billionaire ex-president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani during last Friday's prayer session at Tehran University signals an escalation of the struggle that has raged within the Islamic Republic's ruling establishment since last month's disputed election.

Rafsanjani, one of the chief backers of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi, used his sermon to call for the release of Iranians arrested at demonstrations protesting the results of the election. He also called for unspecified measures to ease the "crisis" and "doubt" about the June 12 ballot count which he said were held by parts of the population, including what he termed "a great section of our erudite and knowledgeable people."

The ex-president sharply criticized state-run radio and television coverage of the election and its aftermath. While not mentioning him by name, Rafsanjani's speech was widely seen as a challenge to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had spoken at the same venue nearly a month ago, declaring the elections legitimate, blaming street protests on foreign incitement and demanding that the demonstrations cease.

The right-wing political agenda of the opposition found expression in the chants taken up by the crowd last Friday. When the traditional slogan "Death to America"—dating from the 1979 revolution—came over the loudspeakers, demonstrators responded with "Death to Russia" and "Death to China."

Expressed in these chants is not some hostility to the repressive policies of the Chinese and Russian regimes, but rather the demand for a fundamental shift in Iranian policy toward accommodation with US imperialism and closer ties to Western capital. This political orientation dovetails with the aims pursued by Washington, including through covert intelligence operations within Iran.

Rafsanjani cloaked his remarks in a call for compromise and unity at the top, declaring, "These are bitter circumstances and times. No one from any faction wanted it to turn out like this. We all suffered losses." He seemed to accept the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a fait accompli, declaring, "At any rate, it is done and we have passed that stage and entered another stage."

But Rafsanjani is a highly experienced tactician, referred to in Iranian political circles as "the shark." A fierce opponent of Ahmadinejad, who defeated him in the 2005 presidential election, he clearly senses that the balance of forces is shifting within Iran's bourgeois state and in the country's ruling circles as a whole. The speech had the character of a political probe and an attempt to rally forces within the state for the purpose of effecting a strategic change in domestic and foreign policy.

In the wake of Rafsanjani's speech, the other former president identified with Moussavi and the "reformists," Mohammad Khatami, called for a referendum on the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad government. He praised Rafsanjani's speech, citing his demand that "public trust should be restored to the society."

Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, responded to these challenges Monday, making a public appeal to Iran's "elite."

"The elite should be watchful, since they have been faced with a big test," he said. "Failing the test will cause their collapse."

In a remark that was apparently directed at Rafsanjani, Khamenei added, "Anybody who drives the society towards insecurity and disorder is a hated person in the view of the Iranian nation, whoever he is."

The statements of both sides, with their appeals for the unity of the "elite," reflect a fear shared by all factions of the Iranian establishment that its internecine conflicts will create conditions in which the Iranian workers and oppressed can intervene in a struggle for their own interests.

There were indications that Ahmadinejad is attempting to appease "reformist" elements within the political establishment with a major cabinet reshuffle and an appeal to the country's elite and intellectuals, posted on the president's web site, stating that "all those interested in cooperation on different managerial levels will be invited to work."

One of the first attempts to effect this policy, however, created further controversy. Ahmadinejad appointed his son's father-in-law, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei, the head of the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, as his new first vice-president. The appointment provoked outrage among Ahmadinejad's own supporters, who have not forgotten a controversy over Mashaei's statement last year declaring that Iran is "friends with...the Israeli people."

While Iran's English-language channel Press TV reported Monday that Mashaei had resigned in the face of angry protests, his own web site posted a reply calling the report "a lie...spread by enemies of the government."

The reliance of the so-called "reform" movement on Rafsanjani is a telling indication of its real agenda. Acting as Moussavi's most prominent political backer and providing substantial

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resources for his campaign, Rafsanjani's role became a central issue in the presidential contest. Ahmadinejad effectively exploited his opponent's ties to a man widely regarded as the most corrupt figure in Iranian politics.

In 2005, the German newspaper *taz* provided a blunt profile of Rafsanjani and his family:

"The man of God, who once earned a meager living preaching heavenly redemption for believers, now possesses a fortune estimated at more than a billion US dollars. He is Iran's largest exporter of pistachios. Together with his family, he owns several tourist centers both at home and abroad. His oldest son Mohsen is constructing the Tehran underground; his second son Mehdi is in the natural gas and oil business; his youngest son owns vast swathes of agricultural land; his two daughters Faezeh and Fatima are active in real estate both in Iran and abroad. Rafsanjani's cousins, nephews and nieces own a considerable portion of the domestic automobile industry, as well as controlling much of the export of pistachios and saffron, and the import of vehicles, paper and machines. A considerable part of Iran's black market is controlled by the Rafsanjani clan."

Rafsanjani and other prominent backers of Moussavi are not motivated by concern for the democratic and social rights of the Iranian people. On the contrary, they are proponents of a more rapid introduction of free market policies, an opening to foreign capital and closer ties with Washington, all of which they see as avenues for expanding their own wealth. Their indifference to the conditions confronting the broad masses of Iranian working people is expressed in their undisguised contempt for the limited social assistance programs introduced by Ahmadinejad, which they see as a waste of resources.

Washington's backing for this opposition is rooted in its own interest in securing a change at the top of the Iranian regime which would make it more amenable to US strategic interests in the region, where it is still fighting two wars, while opening up Iran to the profit-making activities of US-based transnationals and financial interests.

In class terms, the forces surrounding Rafsanjani represent the most reactionary layers within Iranian society. These forces appear to be gathering strength, posing serious dangers to the Iranian working class and oppressed.

The American media, led by the *New York Times*, which praised Rafsanjani and referred to his sermon as "the speech of a lifetime," has greeted the apparent shift in Iranian ruling circles with undisguised glee. While casting the opposition as a "democracy" movement, the seasoned journalistic defenders of US interests are well aware of the strategic implications of the program pursued by Rafsanjani.

Then there is the reaction to Rafsanjani's speech by the *Nation* magazine, which serves as a leading voice for petty-bourgeois ex-left circles in the US.

In his latest piece on Iran, Robert Dreyfuss, the magazine's contributing editor specializing in foreign policy and national security (See: "The Nation's man in Tehran: Who is Robert Dreyfuss?"), defends the Iran policy of the Obama administration against right-wing critics, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, who demand an end to US offers of negotiations with Tehran. The debate is one of tactics, rather than strategy, between two sides committed to "regime change."

"Obama's policy, reiterated this week by Secretary of State Clinton, isn't about 'rushing' to give legitimacy to Ahmadinejad," writes Dreyfuss. "Rather than diplomatic isolation, more sanctions, military pressure, and war, Obama is offering to bring Iran into the community of nations. It's precisely that strategy that invigorated the opposition in Iran, who saw Mousavi as a vehicle for ending Iran's isolation and for dealing respectfully with the United States on the basis of mutual interests."

Nothing could be clearer. The *Nation* is supporting Obama because he is pursuing what it sees as the more clever policy for changing the regime in Iran and bringing in a leadership committed to "dealing respectfully" with Washington "on the basis of mutual interests."

Whose mutual interests, a reader might ask? Clearly, they are not those of working people in Iran or the US, but rather the profit interests of figures like Rafsanjani and the strategic interests of American imperialism.

These US interests include obtaining closer collaboration from Iran in prosecuting Washington's military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Iranian events have served as an important vehicle for middle-class layers who postured as "left" and protested US policy under the Bush administration to embrace imperialist war under Obama.

The state crisis in Iran poses serious dangers to Iranian working people. A turn toward imperialism and foreign capital—spurred on by Washington—will inevitably mean an intensified attack on the living standards and basic rights of the working class.

Iranian workers cannot defend their class interests or thwart the designs of US imperialism by aligning themselves with either the so-called "reformist" faction of Rafsanjani and Moussavi or the self-styled "principalists" led by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. Only by mobilizing its own strength politically and rallying the masses of oppressed can the Iranian working class achieve genuine democratic and social rights. This requires the fight for a workers' government and the socialist transformation of Iran as part of a worldwide struggle for socialism.

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