

Signs of mounting crisis within Iranian regime

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In defiance of a government ban, tens of thousands of university students on Monday marked Iran's annual National Student Day by joining anti-government protests at universities in Teheran, Tabriz, Mashad and other major urban centers.

The December 7 event commemorates students who were killed by forces loyal to the Shah during a 1953 demonstration opposing US and British imperialism.

The Iranian government ordered representatives of the Western media not to cover Monday's protests. The Western press had promoted the protests that erupted last June after opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi claimed the June 12 presidential election had been stolen on behalf of the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In Teheran, the demonstrations reportedly spread beyond the campuses, from which police are banned, to the city center. Both the pro-opposition web site *Mowjcamp* and a newspaper that is supportive of the government said shots were fired into the air at least once to disperse the crowds. Tear gas was widely used.

Official Iranian media spoke of "clashes" and showed video depicting street fighting between protesters and members of the Basij ("Mobilisation Resistance Force") government-organized militia. In Teheran alone there were reportedly well over a hundred arrests.

Mousavi, who is one of the architects of the Islamic Republic, having served as Iran's prime minister from 1981 to 1989, intended to appear at the protests in Teheran, but was prevented from leaving his home by security forces. Mehdi Karroubi, another defeated presidential candidate and prominent "Green Revolution" leader, was likewise barred from joining the anti-government action.

Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, did put in an appearance. Reputed to be Iran's richest man, Rafsanjani joined his successor as president, the "reformer" Mohammad Khatami, in endorsing Mousavi's presidential bid and subsequently lent his support to the campaign to overturn the June 12 election results.

He remains a major figure in the Islamic Republic, heading two key government bodies, the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts. Routinely dubbed a pragmatist in the Western media, Rafsanjani spearheaded Iran's adoption of pro-big business market reforms and is long identified with the attempt to reach an accommodation between the Islamic Republic and US imperialism.

Reports suggest that the temper of Monday's demonstrations was more radical than previous protests. The color green was less in evidence.

Demonstrators chanted slogans denouncing Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, as well as Ahmadinejad, and the inscription "emblem of Allah" was cut out from Iranian flags.

In response to the demonstrations, Chief Iranian Prosecutor Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei vowed Tuesday that authorities would no longer treat protesters leniently.

Over the past six months, Iranian authorities have repeatedly issued conflicting statements and orders in response to opposition protests, at times using significant force and at others seeking to contain rather than directly suppress them. Scores of second- and third-rank opposition leaders have been arrested and subjected to show trials based on confessions, but several of the convicted have subsequently been released on bail while appealing their convictions.

Behind this ambivalence lie deep fissures within Iran's clerical-bourgeois regime—fissures heightened by imperialist pressure, the mounting social contradictions of the Islamic Republic, and the world economic crisis.

Over the past ten years, US imperialism has ratcheted up its three-decade-long campaign to subvert the Islamic Republic, as part of its military-strategic drive to dominate the world's principal oil-exporting regions—the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. It is an open secret that the Bush administration contemplated launching war against Iran, despite Teheran's collaboration in the US invasion of Afghanistan and its tacit acceptance of the US conquest of Iraq. The Obama administration has said it will lead the great powers in imposing new sanctions against Iran, including a potentially crippling gasoline embargo, unless Teheran bows to its demands concerning Iran's nuclear program by the end of this year.

At the same time, the world economic crisis and the consequent fall in world oil prices have exacerbated longstanding conflicts within the elite over the subsidies and social welfare programs the regime has used to mitigate social conflict.

While the Mousavi-led opposition has sought to cast itself as the proponent of democracy and tolerance, it is led by many of those, beginning with Mousavi and Rafsanjani themselves, who oversaw ferocious repression against the left and the working class in the decade following the 1979 revolution. It speaks for a section of the Iranian elite that has been eager to strike a bargain with Washington and is embittered by Ahmadinejad's "squandering" of the profits from the oil boom of 2005-2008 on social spending.

There are also longstanding frictions between the conservative-dominated Majlis (parliament) and the executive branch led by

Ahmadinejad.

The Majlis majority joined Mousavi in denouncing a tentative agreement with Washington under which Iran was to ship much of its enriched uranium abroad for upgrading to 20 percent. They declared it a betrayal of Iran's national right to have a full civilian nuclear program, and one that would leave Iran at the mercy of the great powers' good will.

Late last month, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani went out of his way to praise Rafsanjani, calling him "one of the pillars of the regime" and "a part of the history of the revolution." He also strongly defended Rafsanjani's family, saying they were victims of the politics of "destruction."

In recent weeks, Ahmadinejad and the Majlis have been arguing over legislation authorizing the dismantling of the system of price subsidies for fuel, food, transport and water. All factions of the bourgeois elite agree that the subsidies, which by many estimates are in the order of \$100 billion per year, need to be phased out. But there are bitter differences over how fast, over what, if anything, should be done to contain the ensuing price rises, and whether lower-income sections of the population should be compensated.

Business is worried about the impact of energy price increases on its operating costs and is pressing for some form of compensation.

Ahmadinejad has sought to dress up the elimination of subsidies as a social justice measure, with the argument that the better-off consume more than the poor and have thus been the biggest beneficiaries of gasoline subsidies.

Originally, he proposed that 70 percent of the population receive direct cash payments to compensate for the elimination of the price subsidies. Now he is saying that half of the population should receive new income support in lieu of the subsidies and that half of all savings from the elimination of subsidies should be directed into income support measures.

Ahmadinejad's claims notwithstanding, the Iranian bourgeoisie will use its control over production and pricing to wrest the benefits of the dismantling of the price subsidy system.

Faced with the mounting threats from the imperialist powers, deepening economic crisis and the threat of social conflict, Khamenei has sought to paper over the gaping fissures within the regime. In a November 26 speech, Iran's supreme leader accused the Islamic Republic's enemies of seeking to discredit both Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani.

Declared Khamenei, "The country's officials, including the president, speaker of Majlis, head of judiciary, and head of the Expediency Council, are all individuals who govern the country's affairs and must have the trust and good will of the people."

But when the Majlis called a "unity" meeting for December 1, both Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani failed to attend, claiming their invitations had come too late.

Rafsanjani did give a speech two days later in which he called for the unity of the clerical-political establishment to confront a consensus of the "big powers... to deny our country's natural nuclear rights."

"The most important thing needed inside," declared Rafsanjani, "is unity at a time that our country faces increased cruel resolutions, insults

and bullying. The enemies will step up their evil-doing if they feel we do not have the same voice."

He suggested that it was up to Khamenei to broker a deal with the leaders of the opposition. "The only one who can pave the way to unity is the supreme leader," he said.

A week later, Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi responded with a speech in which he denounced sections of the clergy for failing to back the government. He explicitly denounced Rafsanjani and said his son should be investigated for his opposition activities.

"Unfortunately, based on precise intelligence, a lot of forces that were expected to defend the supreme leader instead went with those who rose against the supreme leader," said Iran's intelligence chief Wednesday.

"The recent plot is like an iceberg floating in the ocean. Its larger part is under the water, while a small part of it is visible."

"Shockingly," he continued, "Rafsanjani expresses the same ideas that come in the statements of (opposition) leaders."

The deepening economic crisis and the drive of the Iranian bourgeoisie to shift the burden of it onto the working class and rural poor through the dismantling of subsidies, privatizations and social welfare cuts will invariably propel the working class to mount its own challenge to the Islamic Republic.

The pivotal question is: On what program will this opposition develop?

The working class must oppose both imperialism and all sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie and not allow its opposition to be corralled behind the right-wing forces associated with figures such as Mousavi and Rafsanjani.

An independent movement of the working class would fundamentally transform the political situation, creating the most favorable conditions to separate and rally those elements from within the middle class who are genuinely seeking a means to fight for democracy and social equality from the reactionary bourgeois opposition.



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