

Iran's Green Revolution leaders seek compromise with Supreme Leader

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All three of the principal leaders of Iran's "Green Revolution" bourgeois opposition have made conciliatory public statements in recent weeks, backing off from their demand for the annulling of the June 2009 presidential election and reaffirming their support for the Islamic Republic.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, who proclaimed himself—not the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the true victor of last June's presidential election, issued a statement at the beginning of the new year in which he denounced the government for repressing opposition protests on the Shia holy day of *Ashura*. The government's "policy of terror," said Mousavi, was causing some protesters to move "toward unacceptable radicalism" in their "slogans and actions."

But the former prime minister also called for "national unity," said he believes the current regime can be reformed, and suggested that the Ahmadinejad administration can be held to account by "the people, the parliament and judiciary" if political prisoners are released, bans on various pro-opposition newspapers are lifted, and the constitution's provisions concerning political activity are respected.

Mousavi also said that new election laws are needed so as to "regain the people's trust." But he did not advocate, in what he termed his "solution for getting out of the crisis," a fresh presidential election—hitherto his and the Green movement's ostensible principal demand.

Shortly thereafter, Mohammad Khatami, Iran's president from 1997 to 2004 and one of the principal sponsors of Mousavi's election campaign, issued an even more conciliatory statement. "The reform movement and I personally," wrote Khatami, "recognize the current administration of Mr. Ahmadinejad, but we must combat extremism."

This past week, Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of Iran's parliament, a defeated candidate in the 2005 and 2009 presidential elections, and the third in the troika of Green leaders, issued a series of statements acknowledging Ahmadinejad as Iran's president and declaring the supreme leader or guardian of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, the "best person" to solve the current political crisis.

Karroubi said slogans that called into question Khamenei's leadership, the post of supreme leader or *velayat-e faghih*, and other key institutions of the Islamic Republic "are 100 percent wrong." "I don't agree with slogans that call for changing power structures."

He also condemned the right-wing, pro-US slogan taken up by opposition demonstrators on several occasions, most notably on Iran's traditional day of solidarity with the Palestinian people—"Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon. My life is for Iran."

Karroubi, it need be noted, had until last week been the most strident

of the three Green leaders.

"There have been lots of efforts in the past few weeks to defuse the tension," an unnamed confidante of the opposition leaders told the *New York Times* late last month.

The Green opposition has been hailed by all sections of the bourgeois political establishment in the US and Europe, including the nominal "left," as a "democratizing" movement. In fact it speaks for powerful elements within Iran's bourgeois-clerical establishment who bitterly oppose the populist policies that Ahmadinejad—who came to power as the result of a popular backlash against the neo-liberal policies implemented under Khatami and before him Hashemi Rafsanjani—pursued during his first term as president. They denounce Ahmadinejad for squandering the proceeds of the 2005-08 oil boom on price subsidies and social spending and for pursuing a needlessly confrontational policy toward the US. They also resent the growing economic and political power of the top brass of the Revolutionary Guards and its business cronies.

Three interlinked factors account for the Green leaders' shift toward seeking an accommodation with Khamenei, even if it means accepting Ahmadinejad's presidency.

First, they are concerned that the opposition protests, which since their eruption last June have been dominated by middle-class layers, have assumed an increasingly radical character. Both openly right-wing, pro-monarchist and pro-US forces and self-avowed socialists have raised slogans calling into question the institutions of the Islamic Republic.

Second, the world economic slump and US-led sanctions have dealt crippling blows to Iran's economy, driving up unemployment and inflation. Several of the country's largest banks are said to be in danger of default.

The Ahmadinejad government, with the full support of Khamenei, has responded to the crisis by shifting sharply to the right. It is vowing to press forward with privatization of much the country's economy and has won parliamentary approval for a five-year scheme to phase out some \$100 billion worth of subsidies for gasoline, food, and other vital goods and services.

All sections of the Iranian elite recognize that these changes raise the prospect of an open confrontation with the working class and rural poor.

Last but not least, there is Washington's unrelenting campaign of pressure against Iran. While the Green Revolution leaders are amenable to a rapprochement with Washington, the US, under Obama, as previously under George W. Bush, has served notice that it will accept nothing less than unequivocal acceptance on Teheran's part of US hegemony in the Middle East. This has been exemplified by

Washington's refusal to allow Iran to exercise its rights as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop a full-cycle civilian nuclear program.

In recent weeks the US and its European allies have ratcheted up their campaign of threats and bullying against Tehran, pledging that Iran's failure to agree to curbs on its civilian nuclear program will result in further economic sanctions.

Last week, the German industrial conglomerate Siemens announced that as of next summer it will seek no new orders in Iran. Siemens' announcement came the day after German Chancellor Angela Merkel told a joint press conference with Israeli President Shimon Peres that "Iran's time is up. It is now time to discuss widespread international sanctions."

In a voice vote last Thursday, the US Senate passed a bill calling for a gasoline export embargo on Iran that would be enforced by sanctions on foreign-based institutions that defy the US embargo. Such an embargo would have a huge impact since Iran, due to a lack of refining capacity, currently imports some 40 percent of its gasoline.

And on Friday, US newspapers reported that General Petraeus, who oversees the US's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, recently revealed that the US, with a view to a future conflict with Iran, has stationed anti-missile batteries in four Gulf States—Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait—and will henceforth deploy Aegis anti-missile cruisers in the Persian Gulf at all times.

Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and current-day head of two of the Islamic Republic's most important institutions—the Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council—has over the past two months repeatedly pointed to the threat from the US in advocating a compromise between the Green opposition and the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei regime. Noting that "foreign enemies have a special account on the current clashes within the country," Rafsanjani recently declared, "now, more than any other time, unity among political forces of the country and people seems crucial."

Reputedly Iran's richest capitalist, Rafsanjani openly supported Mousavi's election campaign and his subsequent challenge to the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's victory.

He is far from the only powerful voice within the current governing bodies of the Islamic Republic to favor reconciliation between the rival factions of the clerical-bourgeois establishment.

Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, who has close political and family ties to the top Shia clergy, has joined Rafsanjani in denouncing "extremism"—a term meant to denote both the more radical of the opposition protesters and those in the government who advocate increased repression.

In an effort to promote reconciliation, Iran's national television network last month broadcast several debates between prominent opposition and government supporters.

However, there are powerful elements in the regime that remain opposed to any concessions to the opposition.

Ayatollah Mohammed Yazdi, a former head of Iran's judiciary and currently a member of Iran's Guardian Council or constitutional court, denounced Rafsanjani late last month for advocating compromise with those who "have separated themselves from" the supreme leader. "How," asked Yazdi, "can you say the moderates from both sides must resolve the issues with the Leadership [Khamenei]? Tell us who the moderates of the opposition are."

Other government spokesmen have vowed that the opposition will

not be allowed to use this month's commemorations of the February 11, 1979 revolution that toppled the brutal regime of the US-backed Shah to mount protests. "Any voice or color other than the voice of the Islamic Revolution will be pushed aside," declared Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani, the Tehran Revolutionary Guard commander. "And if a minority makes such an attempt, it will be firmly confronted."

Mousavi and Karroubi both condemned as "hasty" last week's hanging of two monarchists who had been found guilty of preparing terrorist attacks. While the two were arrested prior to last June's election, they were tried alongside Green movement supporters.

An extensive interview Karroubi gave to the London-based *Financial Times* last week sheds further light on the orientation of the Green leaders.

He argued that the multiple crises enveloping the Islamic Republic would propel "moderates" in both elite factions to unite so as to remove Ahmadinejad or at least sack many of his ministers and restrict his power and influence as president.

Said Karroubi, "I don't know how long it will take, but I think it won't take too long. Look at certain indices: inflation, stagnation of the economy, closure of economic centers, in particular industrial units, which are working with 20 or 40 per cent of their capacities, increasing unemployment, poverty line standing at 7m rials (\$700) which means above 40 per cent of people are poor."

Karroubi emphasized his support for the Islamic Republic, including the institution of *velayat-e faghih*, which underpins the exalted political position of the Shia clergy within the Islamic Republic. But in so doing, he also revealed his fear of a revolutionary challenge to the regime from the working class.

"A majority of people," Karroubi told the *Financial Times*, "do not want to overthrow the regime. In fact, anyone who cares about the future of this country is not after toppling the regime because it is not clear what would come out of it. If it was not thanks to the extraordinary leadership skills of Imam Khomeini, God knows what would have happened to Iran with the 1979 revolution."

What Karroubi is referring to is the pivotal role Ayatollah Khomeini played in harnessing, through Shia populism, the popular anti-imperialist upsurge that convulsed Iran between 1978 and 1982 to the program of the bourgeoisie, while deploying the state apparatus—with the full support of Mousavi, Rafsanjani and Khamenei—to ruthlessly suppress the left and all independent working class organizations.

Khomeini's ability to suppress the revolution, however, was not principally the result of his political cunning. Rather, it was due to a vacuum of working class leadership. The Stalinist Tudeh Party and other ostensibly Marxist groups subordinated the working class to the Khomeini regime on the grounds that the revolution in Iran was a bourgeois-democratic revolution and had, therefore, to be led by the "progressive" wing of the national bourgeoisie.

Thirty years on, the burning question once again is the development of an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist program in opposition to imperialism and all factions of the bourgeoisie.



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