

Iranian regime mounts display of “national unity” on anniversary of anti-Shah revolution

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Hundreds of thousands of Iranians poured into Azadi or Freedom Square in central Teheran yesterday, one of more than 800 rallies held across Iran on the occasion of the 31st anniversary of the popular insurrection that overthrew the brutal, US-backed dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Under conditions where the US and its European allies have ratcheted up their threats against Iran and Iran’s Green Wave bourgeois opposition has challenged the government’s legitimacy, the Islamic Republic’s ruling elite was determined to mount a massive display of national unity and popular support.

Demonstrators carried placards of Ayatollah Khomeini, the official founder of the Islamic Republic, and of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Republic’s current Supreme Leader or Guardian, and shouted slogans condemning the US and Israel.

Addressing the crowd in Azadi Square, Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused the “hegemonic powers” of opposing Iran and its nuclear program because they want to dominate the Middle East. “A free Iran, an advanced, powerful Iran,” said Ahmadinejad, “is considered an impediment to that objective. This is the secret behind the opposition to the Iranian nation in the past 31 years.”

Ahmadinejad subsequently announced that in defiance of the great powers Iran has begun to produce 20 percent enriched uranium so as to fuel a nuclear research reactor that produces medical isotopes needed for treating cancer patients.

“All of our (nuclear) activities,” said Ahmadinejad, “are transparent and under the supervision of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency).”

“When we say,” he continued, “we do not manufacture the bomb, we mean it, and we do not believe in manufacturing a bomb. If we wanted to manufacture a bomb, we would announce it.”

The Council for Coordination of Islamic Propagation, which is charged with organizing the Islamic Republic’s official ceremonies and commemorations, issued a statement “on behalf of the demonstrators” that proclaimed the theocratic principal of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the Guardian Jurist or Supreme Leader) a pivotal guarantor of national unity and of the state’s republican and Islamic character.

The Green Wave opposition movement had vowed to use yesterday’s commemorations to contest the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad regime’s claim to be the true heir of the 1979 Revolution.

The principal Green leaders—Hossein Mousavi and Medhi Karroubi, both of whom ran against Ahmadinejad in the June 2009 presidential election, and former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami—urged their supporters to come out en masse yesterday, although they added to these appeals warnings not to challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic or to court confrontation with security forces and the pro-government Basij militia.

Green Wave promoters in the right-wing-led Iranian émigré community in the US and the Western media were not so circumspect. They actively campaigned for a repeat of the Dec. 27 Ashura day protests, when tens, probably hundreds, of thousands of oppositionists took to the streets, hijacking and disrupting the official commemorations, and clashing—sometimes at their own initiative—with the police and Basij.

Thus, Mohsen Sazegara, a one-time high official of the Islamic Republic who now appears regularly on Voice of America’s Persian language broadcasts, proclaimed February 11 “decisive—a day on which the presence of the opposition in their millions can change the balance of power in their favour.”

While it is impossible, due to the restrictions Iran’s government has imposed on the media, to precisely measure the extent of opposition activity yesterday, it is clear that the government succeeded in marginalizing and suppressing the protests. It did so by mobilizing its supporters in large numbers and by mounting a massive security operation.

Time magazine, hardly a supporter of the Iranian regime, acknowledged that there were few signs of protest in an article titled “Iran’s Anniversary: Where was the opposition?” It noted that during Ahmadinejad’s hour-long speech in Azadi Square there was only one “incident of protest”—a demonstrator held up a picture of Khomeini with an X through it, which was quickly confiscated.

“In a line of 20 Basij motorcycles on a side street,” continued *Time*’s report, “young riders stood nearby, chatting and laughing—in stark contrast to earlier protests, during which most Basij were constantly on the move responding to opposition protests in various squares in [Teheran]... Any sporadic street battles that may have taken place were small and occurred in virtual isolation.”

According to most reports, including many postings on pro-opposition web sites, the same was true across Iran. Opposition rallies never numbered more than a few thousand and seldom even that.

Without question, the regime went to great lengths to prevent the opposition from repeating its earlier successes in using official events to mount counter-demonstrations.

Mousavi and Karroubi were both manhandled and prevented from making their way to Azadi Square or any potential opposition rallying point. Tens of thousands of security forces were in evidence on the streets of Teheran. Internet and mobile phone coverage was disrupted.

In the days running up to the February 11 commemoration, government officials vowed that opposition protests would not be tolerated. The head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp, General Hossein Hamadani, warned “severe measures will be taken against the opposition on this day,” while in Teheran Friday prayer leader Ahmad Khatami said that on the anniversary of the Shah’s overthrow the opposition would be “silenced and dissolved for good.”

In a further act of intimidation, nine people were recently sentenced to be executed for their involvement in opposition protests.

All that being said, the opposition’s failure to break through the government’s security clampdown speaks to its narrow social base.

The Green Wave or Revolution has been promoted by the western media, the Obama administration, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Germany’s Angela Merkel and Britain’s Gordon Brown, to name only the most prominent, as a “democratizing movement.” In fact, it speaks for a faction of the Iranian bourgeois and clerical establishment that hopes to secure and expand its privileges by speeding up the neoliberal reform of Iran’s economy and by pressing for a rapprochement with the US.

The bulk of its popular support has come from the middle class, especially the upper middle class of north Teheran and a handful of other urban centers. This layer bristles at many of the reactionary religious restrictions imposed by the Islamic regime. But it is indifferent, and for the most part downright hostile, to the social needs and aspirations of the working class and rural poor, which, as a result of two decades of economic “reforms,” must endure increased poverty and economic insecurity.

Iran’s westernized middle class, as the statements of their relatives and associates in Iran’s expatriate community reveal, includes a not insubstantial section that now regrets, if it ever supported, the Shah’s overthrow.

The fizzle of yesterday’s opposition protests may also reflect divisions and ambivalences within a section of the Green-aligned Islamic establishment under conditions where the US and European powers have stepped up their bullying and threats against Iran.

Hashemi Rafsanjani, an ex-president and the current head of two important governing bodies of the Islamic Republic, supported Mousavi’s presidential bid and subsequent claims that the elections were stolen. But in the run-up to yesterday’s observances, in which he was a prominent participant, Rafsanjani emphasized the need for “national unity” so as to answer the foreign pressure on the Islamic Republic.

The Ahmadinejad-Khamenei regime, for its part, seeks to exploit the legitimate opposition of the Iranian masses to the bullying of

the US and its allies and the widespread popular hostility to the neoliberal record of the reform/Green camp.

In his Revolution Day speech, Ahmadinejad pointed to Iran’s history of subjugation and deprivation at the hands of the great powers, especially British and US imperialism and vowed that Iran would be bullied no more. He also mocked the hypocrisy of Washington and its allies which “are using the nuclear issue as a pretext,” even “when their warehouses are filled with nuclear weapons.” “They have monopolized the technology,” continued Ahmadinejad, “and want to hamper the Iranian nation from getting such technologies.”

Ahmadinejad postured as an opponent of capitalism. He held up Article 44 of the constitution, which until rewritten with Khamenei’s approval stipulated that key sectors of the economy must remain in the hands of the state, and price subsidies as pivotal to Iran’s economic power.

That he could dare do so is in part explained by the rightwing character of the Green opposition, which has consistently attacked him for lavishing too much money on social programs and the poor.

His government has pressed ahead with privatization and recently adopted a scheme to phase out in five years \$100 billion worth of price subsidies on food and energy and other essential goods and services. For millions, if not tens of millions of Iranians, these subsidies have provided a vital lifeline, preventing them from falling into abject poverty.

Ahmadinejad also included a condemnation of Marxism in his address. This was far from gratuitous.

Throughout the three decades of the Islamic Republic, its bourgeois-clerical ruling elite has ruthlessly suppressed the working class and the left, because their own experience in the 1979 Revolution demonstrated to them the threat that the working class could emerge as the protagonist of a new egalitarian social order.

If that potential was not realized, it was because the working class was misled. The Stalinist Tudeh party and other ostensibly Marxist and socialist groups subordinated the working class to Khomeini and a section of the Shia clergy on the grounds that the revolution could not and should not go beyond the consolidation of an “anti-imperialist” bourgeois national regime.

Under conditions where the imperialist powers are preparing for a showdown with Iran and the social contradictions in the Islamic Republic are reaching a boiling point, the critical question is the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie and imperialism.



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