

Iran's Green Protests: Elite power struggle intensifies as Supreme Leader nears death

Sahand Avedis
8 March 2011

In the midst of an historic uprising of the working class in North Africa and the Middle East directed against the region's authoritarian US-backed regimes, Iran's bourgeois Green opposition has sought to relaunch itself. However, the Green demonstrations have failed to galvanize broad popular support—indeed, they have been shunned by the working class and urban poor—and consequently have been readily contained by the security forces of the Islamic Republic and aligned militia.

This failure has again laid bare the narrow social base of the Greens. A movement led by longtime now-marginalized leaders of the Islamic Republic, the Greens draw their support overwhelmingly from the more privileged sections of the urban population and seek a speedy rapprochement with US imperialism.

While the Green's principal spokesman, former prime minister and 2009 presidential candidate Mirhossein Mousavi, has conceded that the Greens have been hampered by their lack of support from the poor and the working class, and various Green strategists and their US advisers—including veteran CIA operatives—have urged the Greens to tap into plebeian discontent, the recent demonstrations did not raise the social grievances of working people over increasing poverty, social inequality and economic insecurity.

And this at a time when government's recent removal of subsidies on vital goods and services, including bread, gasoline and heating fuels, is having a huge adverse impact on the working class and rural toilers.

Had the Greens sought to make an issue of the subsidy cuts, it would have been hypocritical and demagogic. They have long attacked President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for not implementing "pro-market" policies quickly enough and for "wasting" the country's oil wealth on social spending. Nevertheless, the Greens' failure to make any appeal to the social grievances of the mass of the Iranian people speaks volumes about the class character of the opposition and its claims to represent a democratic alternative to Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei.

On February 14, a few tens of thousands, according to the highest estimates, gathered on the streets of Tehran, a city of 12 million, only to be dispersed by the police. There were similar gatherings, albeit on a much smaller scale, in some of Iran's other major cities. The follow-up demonstrations on February 20, called with the hope that the protest movement would gain momentum as it did in Egypt, were even smaller than those on February 14.

Leaders of the Green movement who have defected to the west and are in contact with Mousavi and fellow opposition leader and defeated 2009 presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi called for a third demonstration on Tuesday, March 1 to commemorate Mousavi's birthday and to protest the recent house arrest of the two leaders.

The media in the west, which has been championing the Greens, had to acknowledge that the March 1 demonstration was sparsely attended. A report by CNN wire staff from Tehran said that "protesters appeared, by all accounts, to be heavily outmuscled by police, who showed in force in

Tehran's squares and major thoroughfares in anticipation of demonstrations called by supporters of two key opposition leaders." The *Wall Street Journal*, the mouthpiece for the most rightwing sections of the US ruling class, was virtually alone in insisting that the protests had been a success. Parroting Green propaganda and through an unnamed Tehran analyst, it claimed last Tuesday's protests "showed the opposition has penetrated deeply in the society and managed to spread to smaller cities."

The recent Green demonstrations were the opposition's first major attempt in almost a year to challenge the government on the streets. With a view to promoting the false association between Iran's opposition and the democratic aspirations of the masses, the western press and the Green leaders have pointed to the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa as the catalyst for the latest opposition campaign. In fact their real motivation is the deepening power struggle within Iran's elite under conditions where Supreme Leader Khamenei—who, as his title suggests, wields vast constitutional powers and has long sought to arbitrate between the contending bourgeois factions—is reported to be gravely ill and possibly near death.

By mobilizing their supporters in the streets, the Green leaders were hoping to bolster the position of former president and billionaire businessman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani has been at the center of power in Iran since a faction of the Islamic clergy spouting a Shia populist theology and acting on behalf of the Iranian bourgeoisie hijacked the revolution that swept the Shah from power in 1979. But he now appears to be on the verge of losing all his positions within the Islamic republic.

Rafsanjani and his family backed Mousavi's 2009 bid to unseat Ahmadinejad, who first won the presidency in 2005 by defeating Rafsanjani in a run-off, with several of Rafsanjani's children demonstrably participating in the post-election protests that sought to overturn the results of the 2009 election. While Rafsanjani ultimately said he deferred to Khamenei and accepted the results of the contested election, he has repeatedly called for conciliation with the opposition—an accommodation presumably to be reached at the expense of Ahmadinejad.

For their part, the president and his supporters have been mounting an aggressive campaign against Rafsanjani, a campaign that appears to have been stepped up as Khamenei's grip weakens. Their objective is to strip Rafsanjani of the two powerful posts he still holds. He is the chairman of the Assembly of Experts, the body that ostensibly supervises Khamenei in his role as Supreme Leader and that will ultimately choose his successor. Rafsanjani also chairs the Expediency Discernment Council, a body charged with regulating conflicts between the parliament and the Council of Guardians, which has many functions of a supreme court.

Ahmadinejad's rise to power in the 2005 presidential election was propelled by a demagogic appeal to popular discontent over rising poverty and social inequality and nationalist criticisms of the repeated concessions Tehran made to US imperialism over Iran's nuclear program in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq. His victory was a popular

repudiation of the neoliberal policies pursued by his immediate predecessor, the “reformer” Mohammad Khatami, and by Rafsanjani, Iran’s president from 1989-1997.

During his first term in office Ahmadinejad did raise social spending significantly, a policy made possible by the high oil prices between 2005 and 2008. Nonetheless, he continued and indeed accelerated the pro-market policies of former administrations. Only his privatization policies rather than favoring the established crony capitalists formed around Rafsanjani and the reformists transferred the ownership of state assets to businesses and businessmen associated with the Revolutionary Guards.

The Green movement which formed around Mousavi’s presidential campaign in 2009 attracted mostly upper-middle class layers in Tehran and other large cities, who responded to the complaints of sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie that too much of the country’s oil money was being spent on the rural and urban poor and who resented the growing economic power of the Revolutionary Guards officer corps and their business associates because it was impinging on their own profit making.

The Greens tried to cloak themselves in “democratic colors” by criticizing some of the reactionary social prescriptions of the Islamic Republic. But they advocated speedier implementation of market reforms and signaled their support for a rapprochement with Washington by attacking Ahmadinejad for his “adventurist” foreign policy.” In the nearly two years since the election, the Greens have made even clearer their pro-US orientation through the stance taken by their representatives abroad. With few exceptions, the Greens’ international spokesmen have lent support to the US campaign of bullying and threats over Iran’s nuclear program. Typical is the stance taken by Mojtaba Vahedi, who previously served as Karroubi’s chief of staff and is now acting as his representative abroad. In an April 2010 interview with the *Washington Times*, Vahedi expressed his support for the campaign of economic warfare the US has been mounting against Iran for decades declaring, “The main problem in Iran is the management of the country. Everything that helps to remove Ahmadinejad is good for the people, especially smart sanctions that target the regime.”

If Iran’s workers and poor have spurned the Greens, it is with good reason. Their policies would result in still greater impoverishment of the working class and toilers and an accommodation between the Iranian bourgeoisie and US imperialism at the expense of the masses.

Rafsanjani in particular is synonymous with repression, big business, and corrupt crony capitalism. Like Mousavi, he was in the leadership of the Islamic Republic in the years immediately following the revolution when it used mass violence to suppress all leftwing parties and working-class organizations.

During the past three decades—from the Iran-Contra affair through his patronage of the Green movement—he has spearheaded the faction of the Islamic Republic that seeks to forge a new partnership between the Iranian bourgeoisie and US imperialism. During his eight-year presidency, he implemented IMF restructuring, including a major privatization drive and ruthlessly suppressed workers’ resistance. His liberalization of the foreign exchange rate market and devaluation of the currency in 1991 significantly lowered workers’ living standards. There were riots throughout the country in 1994 that his government drowned in blood.

Following the February 14 demonstration, in which Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of Hashemi Rafsanjani, was briefly arrested, his rivals in the current government and their supporters stepped up their campaign to remove Rafsanjani as the head of the Assembly of Experts. Mohammad Reza Bahonar, a current member of the Majlis and the former deputy speaker of parliament, said that “Hashemi [Rafsanjani] has less than a week to articulate clearly his stance on the recent events or he will be removed from his positions.” There have been daily gathering of government supporters outside Hashemi Rafsanjani’s house chanting “Death to Hashemi.”

The internal election of the secretariat of the Assembly of Experts is planned for this Wednesday and it appears very likely that Rafsanjani will be replaced as its chairman. Under conditions where many are suggesting that Khamenei could soon die—according to Wikileaks an envoy from Rafsanjani informed the US in August 2009 the Supreme leader had only a few months to live—the removal of Rafsanjani as the head of the assembly that would choose his successor takes on added significance. It would clearly represent a further consolidation of power in the hands of Ahmadinejad and his supporters.

But deep divisions remain. The forces grouped around Ahmadinejad apparently had difficulty in finding a candidate to oppose Rafsanjani, who has a decades-long close association with Iran’s leading clerics, and finally had to settle on Mahdavi Kani, an 80-year-old cleric in poor health. Behind the difficulty in finding a suitable pro-Ahmadinejad cleric to replace Rafsanjani lies a deepening rift between his administration, which is closely allied with the Revolutionary Guards, and the clerical establishment. Many elements in the clergy have shared the misgivings of big business over Ahmadinejad’s social welfare policies and consider the president’s recent withdrawal of subsidies too little, too late. They also are angered by Ahmadinejad’s attempt to significantly restrict the share of oil money that goes to religious seminaries (Hozeh).

The opposition from the clerical establishment to Ahmadinejad has been reflected in the maneuvering of Ali and Sadeq Larijani, respectively the Speaker of the parliament and the head of the judiciary. Sons of a prominent Ayatollah, the Larijani brothers have long opposed Ahmadinejad from within the Principlist or religious conservative faction.

Ali Larijani has frequently attacked Ahmadinejad from the right for his “inflation-causing” spending on the poor. Last fall under his leadership the Majlis threatened to impeach the president for purportedly overstepping his authority. The judiciary branch headed by Sadeq Larijani has summoned some key figures of Ahmadinejad’s administration, including his first deputy, on charges of corruption.

Although Ali Larijani considered mounting a challenge to Ahmadinejad in the 2009 election, he and his brother rallied behind the president following the election once Khamenei made it clear that the publicly announced results would stand.

The Larijani brothers, however, have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for Rafsanjani and support for him remaining near the apex of power in the Islamic Republic.

On February 27, at a meeting of the expediency council and with the Larijani brothers sitting on his sides, Rafsanjani made a perfunctory denunciation of the participants in the February 14 demonstrations calling them the enemies of the regime. He at the same time blamed “extremists”—a word he has repeatedly used for Ahmadinejad’s supporters—for weakening “the unity between the people and the regime”. By “people” Rafsanjani means the upper-middle class layers supporting the Green movement.

Rafsanjani’s denunciation of the Green demonstrations, which were clearly called with his approval and to help bolster his position, only shows how precarious his position has become. At their March 1 protest, Green demonstrators chanted “Hashemi leave the dictator!” in response to his reluctant denunciation of the Green protests. Having been politically cornered, Rafsanjani is struggling to save his political life.

Notwithstanding their bitter differences over economic policies and how to respond to the relentless pressure exerted on Iran by US imperialism, all factions of the Iranian political establishment share a common lineage rooted in the violent suppression of the working class after the 1979 revolution. Moreover, since the conclusion of the reactionary Iran-Iraq War in 1988, capitalist “free market” restructuring has been pursued by the successive administrations of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad.

This explains the nonparticipation of the Iranian working class in the

power struggle between various sections of the bourgeoisie that has befuddled many analysts in the west.

Time magazine was recently forced to note, “[T]here is a telling difference between Iran’s Green movement and the coalitions that booted out autocratic rulers in Tunisia and Egypt. Labor groups and workers’ demands have been mostly absent from Green demonstrations, whereas they proved crucial in forcing Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak to step down.” To put it more bluntly, the Green movement is floundering, even as the working class has moved into struggle against authoritarian regimes around the Middle East and at a time when the Iranian working class is experiencing a sharp decline in its living standards due to the subsidy cuts.

Iranian workers undoubtedly are watching the revolutionary developments in the Middle East and North Africa and looking for opportunities to voice their anger and even more importantly to assert their own interests against the Islamic Republic. As around the world, the burning question in Iran is the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie and imperialism and armed with a socialist program.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact