

Trump “defends” the right to protest in Iran, criminalizes protest in Washington

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US President Donald Trump last week published a series of tweets denouncing the Iranian government’s crackdown on protests against austerity and social inequality that shook the bourgeois-clerical regime. The protests, which heralded the entry of the Iranian working class into struggle against the right-wing nationalist regime, left over 20 dead in clashes with government forces and hundreds more arrested.

Trump began a day after the first protests, calling on the Iranian government to “respect their people’s rights, including right to express themselves. The world is watching!”

Having done his best to starve the Iranian population by means of economic sanctions, repeatedly threatened it with war, and banned Iranians from entering the US, Trump offered crocodile tears to the “great Iranian people,” who “have little food, big inflation and no human rights.”

Over the ensuing days, he issued a barrage of tweets decrying “human rights violations” by the regime, at one point criticizing it because it had “closed down the Internet so that peaceful demonstrators cannot communicate.” Last Wednesday, Trump tweeted a veiled threat of direct US intervention, promising the Iranian people, “You will see great support from the United States at the appropriate time!”

As a historically oppressed country, Iran must be defended against imperialist bullying and aggression. This does not, however, imply any political support for the Iranian government, which is a capitalist regime representing the interests of the clerical establishment, the bazaar merchants and big business. Behind the smokescreen of anti-US rhetoric it carries out a policy of brutal austerity against the working class while seeking to curry the favor of European imperialism by opening up Iran to foreign investment and exploitation.

The task of settling accounts with the regime and the Iranian bourgeoisie as a whole is that of the Iranian working class, not US imperialism and its reactionary allies in the region such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies.

Trump’s self-righteous claims to defend the right to protest in Iran are sheer hypocrisy. There is no greater violator of human rights on the planet than the United States. Trump himself is the most deeply anti-democratic and authoritarian figure ever to assume the US presidency.

Even as he was bloviating about democratic rights, his government was carrying out a political trial against peaceful protesters in a brazen attack on the freedom of speech and assembly guaranteed by the US Constitution. The first act of his administration was to collaborate in a police crackdown and launch a legal witch-hunt against people who protested his inauguration on January 20 of last year. The “Disrupt J20” protests were legitimate, democratic expressions of opposition to Trump’s pro-corporate, xenophobic and war-mongering policies.

Washington DC police “kettled” protesters, employed indiscriminate violence and arrested hundreds. They fired on the crowd with chemical agents, pepper spray, rubber bullets and crowd control grenades. Protesters claim the police sexually assaulted detainees. An American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit currently underway against the DC police alleges that officers knocked a ten-year-old boy to the ground and pepper-sprayed his mother.

A document obtained by *Democracy In Crisis* and *The Real News Network* through a Freedom of Information Act request shows that police deployed weapons on at least 191 occasions over the course of the day. Police fired 74 sting ball grenades, a type of

“non-lethal” explosive that ejects rubber balls in a radius surrounding the device's point of impact. A total of 230 people were arrested.

The police crackdown occurred under the purview of the outgoing Obama administration, and the new Trump administration wasted no time attempting to make an example of the protesters. Prosecutors initially charged 214 of the arrested with “felony rioting,” a charge that carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. In April, a grand jury issued additional charges.

So far, 20 people have pleaded guilty. The first round of trials involving six defendants collapsed late last year, with the jury acquitting all of the defendants. One hundred and eighty-eight defendants still await trial, many facing up to 50 years in prison.

Under Trump, every effort has been made to stack the courts against the accused. DC Superior Court Judge Lynn Leibovitz, chosen to oversee the trials, has a long anti-protestor record and is notorious for her authoritarian views. The prosecution has made clear it intends to seek the maximum sentence for any and all defendants who are convicted.

The prosecution is basing itself on the concept of collective punishment: anyone present at the Disrupt J20 protest is criminally liable. In the words of Assistant US Attorney Jennifer Kerkhoff, “A person can be convicted of rioting without breaking a window. It is the group who is the danger, the group who is providing the elements.”

This case, made by the prosecution with Trump’s blessing, stands in direct violation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which prohibits “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” The government’s case is also in violation of international law. The concept of collective punishment is characterized as a war crime under the 1949 Geneva Convention.

The first round of trials underscored the alliance of the police with fascistic elements. The prosecution presented doctored video footage from known far-right extremist groups such as Project Veritas and the Oath Keepers militia. It also has become clear that police infiltrators attended Disrupt J20 meetings prior to the day of the protest. Investigators have since begun spying on social media accounts of individuals who

“liked,” interacted with, or even visited the Disrupt J20 Facebook page.

Were such a travesty of democracy to occur in Iran, North Korea, Russia or China, Trump and the mainstream press would be quick to denounce it in the harshest terms.

From the outset of his administration, Trump has time and time again expressed his utter contempt for the right to freedom of expression. He has on numerous occasions threatened to ban individual reporters and even entire news organizations that published material presenting him in an unfavorable light. Last September, he called on the National Football League to fire any “son of a bitch” who kneeled in protest of police violence and racism during the pledge of allegiance.

In July of last year, Trump told police and immigration agents in Long Island, New York that he loved watching criminal suspects “get thrown into the back of a paddy wagon.” He urged them to rough up people being detained, saying, “Please don’t be too nice.”

Equally hypocritical is Trump's feigning sympathy for the plight of the Iranian working class. The demonstrations in Iran stem from working class anger over the rising cost of living, mass unemployment, austerity measures, deepening social inequality and political repression. These are the same basic problems, exacerbated by Trump’s massive tax cut for the rich and deregulation of big business, confronting the American working class.



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