

Crisis of Islamic Fundamentalism in Iran

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The last few weeks have not been easy for Iran's beleaguered government. In early June, Iranian students at the universities of Tehran, Isfahan, Ahvaz and Shiraz protested against the religious dictatorship as well as plans to privatise higher education in Iran. Many were attacked by the security services and fundamentalist thugs wielding clubs. According to one government source 4,000 students were arrested. Then in July, Iranian born Canadian photo-journalist Zahran Kazemi died in a Tehran prison cell from head injuries. She had been arrested for taking photos of



Iran's Evin prison. After initial denials, Iranian government sources admitted that she had died of a fractured skull as a result of being beaten. Demonstrations and protests by fellow journalists inside and outside Iran have once more called for an independent inquiry into random arrests of

journalists, writers and commentators by the Iranian security services. In early August news came that Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson, who had recently arrived in the Iraqi Shi'a city of Najaf, in a number of interviews with Western and Iranian journalists had denounced Iran's religious regime as "the worst dictatorship in the world", reminiscent of the "church during the Dark Ages in Europe." All this at a time when Iran remains part of the so called 'axis of evil' and when at least sections of the US administration harbour thoughts of 'regime change' in Iran.



During this latest US lead war against Iraq, Iran's Islamic government defined its foreign policy as one of 'active neutrality'. In reality, of course, Iran was anything but 'neutral': the supporters of 'regime change' in Iraq included many Iran-based Iraqi exiles. Typically, the Iranian government has used rhetoric to condemn 'US aggression' while holding extensive talks with the UK government, and more recently the US, regarding the role of various Shi'a factions in any future Iraq government. International isolation of the Iranian regime and unpopularity at home have left it with no choice, even if Tehran's not entirely explicit support for the US-UK offensive has led to comments about 'turkeys voting for Christmas'. Iran took a similar position in 2001 when it supported the US attacks on Afghanistan. It hoped to benefit from changes in US foreign policy, but no sooner was the war in that country over than



Washington identified Iran as part of 'the axis of evil'. Recent statements from the US make it clear that Iran is high on a list of possible targets for future 'pre-emptive strikes'.



Soudabeh Ardavan's Evin Prison drawings

The failures of theocracy

Twenty-three years after coming to power, the

Iranian clergy presides over a country where abject poverty, drug addiction, and prostitution (including child prostitution) have become major social issues that threaten the fabric of Iranian society. The gap between the rich and poor is wider than ever. Official statistics put unemployment at 16 per cent, but the real figure is much higher. Hundreds of thousands of workers haven't been paid for months, and government figures admit that more than 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Both the supporters and the opponents of the Iranian president consider the experience of reform from within, which began with Khatami's election, a failure. The abysmal low turnout in recent local council elections was the nail in the coffin of reformist Islam in Iran; many believe that parliamentary elections to be held in six months will show even lower turnouts. After more than two decades of fundamentalist rule, Iran has the largest secular opposition movement in the Middle East as most people identify 'religious' government as their main enemy.

Large numbers of workers who have not received any salaries for anything from six months to three years demonstrate regularly outside their workplaces. Millions of unemployed workers made redundant through mass privatisation (a policy demanded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in return for billions of dollars of loans) are among the regime's most determined opponents. And the youth and women who have suffered from the interference of religion in every aspect of their private lives are also amongst the growing opposition.

The economics of a capitalist state, even one that calls itself an Islamic Republic, necessitate an organised society. Within the Islamic regime itself, most of the battles of the last decade have been about the religious state's inability to deal with the current world economic order: on the one hand there are those who still believe in the rule of Sharia; on the other those who have decided that the only way the regime can survive is if it establishes the rule of law in a free-market capitalist state. The current president is of the latter party. His presidency has coincided with unfettered privatisation, as well as limited relaxation of the interference of religion in the private lives of the Iranian people. Inevitably, other arguments typical of capitalist ruling circles (between statist reformers and laissez-faire evangelists) have also been aired in Iran's parliament, the Majlis. But in both economic and political spheres the first Islamic state has predominantly been and is increasingly becoming a capitalist dictatorship with strong nationalist and religious overtones.

Iran's 'anti-Islamic' foreign policy

Contrary to those who believe it is 'Third Worldist', the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy was never anything other than a continuation of the Shah's pursuit of regional power. Over the last decade Iranian *realpolitik* has been dominated by highly nationalist competition with Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. To become a regional power, Iran pursues a pragmatic rather than an Islamist foreign policy, despite all the rhetoric we hear from its leaders. In pursuit of its fierce competition with Turkey, for example, Iran supported Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan, simply because Turkey backed the latter.



When Iran opposed the Taliban advances in Afghanistan, Tehran's propaganda talked of the Taliban giving a bad name to Islam. In reality, the defenders of Hezbollah in Lebanon could not have been too worried about the public image of Islam; the main concern was that Saudi and Pakistani money, competing with Iran for domination in Afghanistan, supported the Taliban. And Iran has kept contacts and reasonable relations with Israel, mainly because the enemy of its enemies (the Arabs) must be a friend. Of course, Iranian leaders have made a great deal of their support for the deprived Muslims of the world. Given their total mistrust of Sunni groups, this has effectively amounted to support for a handful of Shi'a community groups in Lebanon, Iraq and Pakistan. This policy has left Iran isolated in the region, and explains its 'active neutrality' in the current war. In fact, even the Islamist rhetoric of the Iranian regime is coming to an end. Last year's dialogue with the UK and US on the Afghan war and this year's covert support for 'regime change' in Iraq signal a final shift in the policy.

As far as Iran is concerned, and irrespective of how long the Islamic regime remains in power, we have come to the end of the road with Islamic fundamentalism. New diversions threaten genuine change. Bombarded with Western propaganda, young people and sections of the women's movement have many illusions about 'Western democracy'. Opposition figures—even among those claiming to be on the left—have chosen to forget that many of Iran's social and economic problems have more to do with the capitalist nature of the Iranian state in the current world order than its Islamic characteristics. These problems cannot be simply resolved with political change from above.

There is no doubt that the failure of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran has led to an unprecedented rise in secularism, and there is every reason to believe that the regime 'could crumble from within'—just as US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld claims. However, the possibility of a US-UK military attack could divert the opposition, and a nationalist backlash could prolong the Islamic regime.

Irrespective of what follows, it is the responsibility of the left to use the experience of Iran's Islamic government to expose the failings of political Islam—both in the economic-social sphere (poverty, corruption, etc.) and in the international arena (i.e., anti-Western rhetoric instead of genuine anti-imperialism). And inside Iran we need to link anti-capitalist campaigns against unemployment, non-payment of salaries and destitution with daily struggles for freedom and democracy. It is essential to show that Iran's social, economic and political ills are interlinked, and that many of these problems are the inevitable consequences of the 'new world order', even if the Islamic nature of this dictatorship gives it a more abhorrent characteristic.