

Iran and the Left

Iran's current rulers are the latest in a long line coming from the peasantry. The small clique of village elders headed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei enjoy control over all state activity thanks to a politics of strategic marriages between philosopher kings, a model now reflected throughout Iranian society. With a contradictory balance between the elected and the appointed, Arab-leaning Islamist and Persian nationalist, bureaucrat and bourgeois, the Supreme Leader has ensured no group has enough power to challenge his supremacy.

In 2005 Ahmadinejad was brought in to further consolidate Khamenei's special relationship with the clique – who were rewarded with a continued transfer of state economic assets to what amounts to state-private Revolutionary Guard ownership – and to move power away from that part of the private sector championed by presidents since 1989. The state bureaucracy is represented by Ahmadinejad through clever lip service to administrative justice, which provides little beyond a justification for the powers that would deliver it. Fashioned in 'man of the people' guise, Ahmadinejad has overseen reforms that have favoured the nepotistic ruling class over entrepreneurs.

The Revolutionary Guard have seen their power buttressed by rumours of war and the revival of the spectacle of martyrdom, which came to represent religiosity during the repulsion of Saddam's eight-year attempted invasion. Fetishization of the martyrdom and courage that saw off the threat of Iraq now directs the legacy of the war onto the Iranian people. Tehran is plastered with the faces of those who gave their lives in the war, so as to associate their sacrifice with the might and right of the regime.

For the majority of those who brought it about, the 1979 revolution was Islamic only in the last instance. Yet today those who speak for the revolutionaries – mostly sidelined or dead – have fetishized the religious element out of all proportion, while directing Iran's wealth into the pockets of their cronies. The enforced hijab, the dismantling of traditional cabaret, as well as the prohibition on nightclubs, bars and loud music have a levelling effect on appearances. The mullahs need something to show for their ideological ramblings, and a lack of miniskirts or cleavage is one of the major achievements they hold up as evidence of moral govern-

ance – a position buttressed by a Western indignation that ignores the country's deeper social ills. Ahmadinejad's introduction of Iran's current moral police – the Gasht Ershad – reaffirmed this commitment to the surface appearance of a uniquely Islamic state. Meanwhile, inconspicuous breaches of morality are endemic: lying, fraud, corruption and theft are the offences that favour power and are permitted. Nepotism is the norm.

Three points come across in Ahmadinejad's speeches – defence of the poor, opposition to corruption, and the upholding of Iran's international dignity – clumsily wrapped in a package of mystification which often finds him blasphemously claiming to have direct connection with Shia Islam's 'Hidden Imam', a messianic figure whose return from occultation will bring an end to suffering and injustice in the world. This simple rhetoric fires across all sections of society, sweeping up all manner of discontent, and allowing Ahmadinejad and his masters to redirect 'accumulated resentment' towards the resting places of foreign intervention and the corruption of their domestic political rivals. The secret operations of meddling and corruption – actual or proverbial – can only be attacked through the actions of the leaders, through whom the people must find vicarious satisfaction. Thus the Khamenei clan appropriate the discontent they created, claim the monopoly on its remedy and sell it in alienated, distorted form back to the people.

Yet however much Ahmadinejad claims to be working tirelessly for the good of the people, the facts of his presidency are stark. Rising inflation, a jump in unemployment, new forms of privatization and growing inequality, while oil revenues for the country reach an all-time high, can only be concealed for so long, and the 'soil of mass psychology' is becoming infertile.

A striking example comes from one of the physical and ideological frontiers of the revolution, Khorramshahr. The city, which borders Iraq, was captured by Saddam in 1981 and remained under occupation for around eighteen months, during which time it was razed to the ground. The anniversary of its liberation is still celebrated in Iran every year. Khorramshahr lies in the province of Khuzestan, the major oil-producing region of Iran. It also has the country's largest river running through it. Yet there is a persistent shortage of drinking water, and poverty and unemployment have

been left to rise steadily. A leadership that regularly takes political benefit from the now-mythical struggle in the city has done nothing to remedy the destitute infrastructure. When Ahmadinejad went to the city shortly before the election amid a massive publicity campaign, fewer than 1,000 people from the city of 166,000 residents bothered to show up, many of them officials and members of the president's travelling rent-a-crowd. When Ahmadinejad's appointees – the mayor, the parliamentary representative and the district commissioner – took to the stage, the crowd began heckling, damning them with specific instances of graft and corruption, and the jeering continued for the president himself, who was visibly rattled by this evident rejection of his 'man of the people' facade. Similar scenes would be repeated throughout Iran. Policies akin to an invading army, with lucrative no-bid and cost-plus deals given to government contractors and officials, characterize Ahmadinejad's economic policies. State capitalism, but without the measure of redistribution traditionally associated with such regimes, is on the back foot. The perpetual US threat has not only seen Iran practise what Noam Chomsky calls 'successful defiance', but the entire state has become defined by its opposition to everything US; a strange sort of independence that does not in any event hold up to scrutiny, since the mullah elite are a godsend to US imperial ambitions in the region.

George Galloway isn't the only one championing the Ahmadinejad line from the Left (although he is the only one with a hefty salary from London-based Iranian state-sponsored Press TV), when he writes 'Mahmoud Ahmadinejad commands the loyalty of the poor, the working class and the rural voters whose development he has championed.' Much left-leaning thought in the UK has sided with Ahmadinejad, branding the opposition movement 'reactionary' puppets of imperial powers. Leftist commentary is littered with praise for Ahmadinejad's 'bold' defiance of the USA and his pro-poor rhetoric. These unlikely allies of a theocratic state point to the Western media's coverage of the northern Tehran 'green' pre-election street parties – the most spectacular element of the opposition campaign, most closely linked to the social-democratic concerns of Western liberals (civil liberties not economic justice) – as evidence of a petty-bourgeois Western invention. They thereby collude with those they claim to oppose, in pushing the much wider discontent with Ahmadinejad out of the frame. The opposition movement is brushed off as a Gucci revolution, lacking real mass support and led by US stooges, while the facts on the ground show mass popular support coming from

all sectors of Iranian society. Trade unions came out unanimously in favour of Moussavi and, despite reports to the contrary, the reformists appealed to the working class with a shift away from the free-marketeering of Khatami to the more egalitarian-minded Moussavi.

Perhaps a certain Left's confusion can be put down in part to an awe felt towards leaders who, despite standing for everything else it opposes, have the spectacle of global mass media through which to voice the one trite point of agreement: US imperialism is bad. Perhaps also there is disdain towards the techno-savvy youth of north Tehran, through whose mobile phones, YouTube uploads and Facebook accounts the opposition view has reached the world.

Others put the street protesters down as puppets in a war of ayatollahs doing Rafsanjani's dirty work. And it's true that the protesters are not, for now, calling for an overthrow of the establishment; they are holding the state up to its own ideals. They simply demand that their opinion be heard. As such, their protest is a moral one that transcends the political manoeuvring at the top. At its most extreme it has become a protest at the unreliability of the Leader's pronouncements and the rule of the Guardian Council; it is not a direct challenge to the Islamic Republic. Indeed the support behind Mir-Hossein Moussavi is far bigger than the man himself. When Iranians exchange a knowing *faghat Moussavi* ('only Moussavi') in passing, it is barely connected to the living individual. His name now represents the demand for more transparent, equitable governance. He was the justification for the state the people were asking for, not its overthrow.

Right now, the frontier lies between the police and the opposition in the streets, who have been striking up friendly chats, when not being chased and beaten. Those of us who exchanged the opposition's victory V-sign with no small number of riot police know that they are ready to be won over, at which point Khamenei will face a very serious challenge.

An alternative to the Islamic Republic is currently absent, save Iran going back to being a US puppet state. With such a limited political spectrum, and treachery at every turn, the green opposition's negative quality makes it the only movement worth supporting at present. Pointing to petty-bourgeois trends within it is unhelpful in a state ruled by an aristocracy, in which all underclasses need to come together if they are to move towards a greater equality. The bitter calm of unofficial general strike and disengagement from public life that shrouds all sections of Iran today is the swelling of what could be a very bloody storm.

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Academic freedom in California?

The American university has become a battleground in struggles surrounding the legitimacy of Israeli policy (see Judith Butler, *RP* 135, January/February 2006, pp. 8–17). It is no secret that the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has targeted universities in a ‘war of position’ to win the hearts and minds of tomorrow’s leaders. This war of ideas increasingly seeks to stifle all classroom criticism of Israel.

In February 2009, Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, William I. Robinson, received a letter from the local chapter of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The letter castigated Robinson for an email he had circulated to students on his Sociology of Globalization course that compared the Israeli military’s recent invasion of Gaza to Nazi atrocities in Warsaw. The next week Robinson was notified that two students from his course had dropped out and had filed formal complaints against him. The students’ complaints paralleled the contents of the ADL letter and claimed an incoherent hodgepodge of faculty code violations, including allegations of sexual harassment, even though Robinson had never met either. To add to these contrivances, the students labelled Robinson’s criticism of Israel ‘anti-Semitic’, a grave charge whose unforgivable misapplication betrays the desperate machinations of those who sling it. The most legible claims were ‘significant intrusion of irrelevant material’ and ‘coercion of conscience’, but, when applied in context to the circulation of a single email sent as optional course material, these two charges were manifestly baseless. The Charges Officer, whose duty is to filter out frivolous claims, instead forced the issue into serious consideration by the Academic Senate. He was likely encouraged by national ADL president Abraham Foxman’s intervening visit to UCSB during which he urged administration officials to prosecute Robinson. Backed by the extraordinary vigilance of the national ADL, the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, StandWithUs International, and the Santa Barbara chapter of Hillel, the complaining students sparked a five-month investigation of Robinson’s decision to send the email. Notwithstanding their factual and legal flimsiness, the charges were given an incredible amount of consideration. The ensuing investigation was rife with procedural violations and irregularities, not to mention a baffling opaqueness.

It became clear that the charges were not just about students’ sensitivities, but rather part of a political inoculation organized in consort with outside organizations (see <http://sb4af.wordpress.com>).

In response, a group of students formed the Committee to Defend Academic Freedom (CDAF) and launched a campaign to put pressure on the university administration that gained considerable international attention. Key to CDAF’s success was its ability to expose the Israel lobby operating behind a veil of flimsy allegations. As it turned out, the weight of the lobby buckled underneath itself. After five months with nary a word to Robinson, Vice Chancellor Gene Lucas delivered the abrupt news on 23 June that the charges against Robinson were dismissed.

Victory in the Robinson case must nonetheless be viewed in the context of an ongoing transnational campaign to stifle any criticism of Israel. Underlying the specific claims of faculty misconduct levelled at Robinson was an idea of Israeli exceptionality. Pedagogically, the effectiveness of comparing two different historical instances of state violence is demonstrated by its ability to provoke discussion and to be subsequently evaluated in terms of its actual closeness of fit. In Robinson’s case, the comparison of Nazi and Israeli atrocities was, however, sidelined by the automatic accusations of anti-Semitism. In many similar cases, professors have lost their tenure battles and even their jobs – Norman Finkelstein, Joel Kovel and Margo Ramlal-Nankoe, to name but a few – while others, like Joseph Massad, have suffered significant delays in tenure decisions and public smear campaigns. The ADL in recent years has explicitly focused its political repression efforts on the University of California. Given the hostile backdrop, Robinson’s ultimate triumph is extraordinary.

Sadly, the Charges Committee’s findings that Robinson had not violated the faculty code do little to assuage the damage already caused by the witch-hunt against him. Scholars will undoubtedly think about the five-month persecution of Robinson before they dare challenge the hegemony of pro-Israel groups. In order to counteract this fallout, the activities of the CDAF show the need to work proactively to promote and maintain a space in American universities for counter-hegemonic discourse about the Israeli occupation.

Maryam Griffin and Daniel Olmos

Immigration raid on SOAS

On 12 June 2009 an immigration raid on a group of cleaners took place at the London School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS). The week before, the SOAS cleaners had set a precedent when they became the first cleaners of a London college to unionize, after a successful campaign for higher wages. The cleaners were employed by ISS, a company providing cleaning services to a number of London colleges. Nine employees were arrested and taken to deportation facilities; some were deported within days, all but one by the end of June. The raid sparked immediate protests, culminating in the occupation of the SOAS directorate's offices, which ended only after the directors agreed to a joint statement condemning the raid and agreeing to prevent any such raids in the future.

The attack is a clear example of the way the state services the interests of employers and owners of capital over working people. A private company, faced with the undesirable precedent of labour unionization, can call upon the immigration police to crack down on those who have dared to raise their heads above the minimum wage threshold. Several 'deviant' workers are deported, the intimidation of other branches is effective and the company continues to pay low wages. The pool of impoverished and undocumented workers, from which the company recruits its staff, remains. This has been the most basic and cynical effect of the raid and it is against this that resistance must focus.

But the raid also highlights several other complex political dilemmas of immigration policing and opposition to it. The immediate vocal demonstrations against the raid prove that at least in London, where one third of the city's population was born outside the UK, repressive immigration policies stand on thin ice. Despite the raid occurring towards the very end of the academic year, at a time when most undergraduates had left, hundreds of SOAS students and staff instantly expressed solidarity with the detained employees. Media articles condemned the raid, and messages of support were sent from at least two members of parliament and from migrant support groups and trade unions around the world.

The obscurity surrounding Immigration Removal Centres, as migrant prisons are referred to in a typically euphemistic fashion, are evidence that the government is already wary of an unfavourable public reaction,

should the practices at these detention centres become widely known. Such practices include the imprisonment of children of all ages, without educational or nursery facilities, a lack of sufficient medical care and a bureaucratic labyrinth that can result in years of detention as the legal machine grinds on. Occasionally the appalling treatment of migrants at the hands of security officers and the random banning of visitors have been documented. The remote location of these migrant prisons, often outside of impoverished towns where the low-skill employment opportunity dampens any resistance, and the restrictive access to them, block unwanted public attention.

This lack of transparency, combined with the swift way in which migrants can be imprisoned and, if they don't quickly find legal representation, deported, means that state and police actions for the most part remain hidden. It is an important victory that opposition against the SOAS raid brought the brutal reality of immigration policy into the public eye.

The SOAS events have shown that a small amount of civil courage and disobedience can make a big difference to the reality of migrant oppression. If only the SOAS directorship, which received a day's notice of the raid, had taken such a stand. Instead, the directorship's cowardly attitude and failure to oppose or obstruct the raid in any way – indeed, its facilitation of it – were shameful and unnecessary, inspired by fear of controversy. The SOAS director later declared his opposition to the raid 'in a personal capacity', but only after widespread condemnation of it had become clear. University leaders should realize that protecting their campus and its people from state violence is part of their mandate. Immigration controls are a particularly insidious way to introduce surveillance into universities, which currently remain relatively sheltered places from which political activism can be organized.

The day-to-day implementation of UK immigration policies results in a steady supply of employees whose security is so precarious that they can be exploited to the hilt. Large-scale policy change in this area seems depressingly remote. But the SOAS events have shown that on a local level, solidarity and decisive action can at least achieve some (future) protection of migrant colleagues from falling victim to the vicious trap of illegality and exploitation.

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