

The crisis of the Islamic Republic and the tasks of the Iranian working class

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Since last Saturday, opponents of the Iranian government have repeatedly clashed with security forces and Basij militiamen in Teheran, Tabriz and many other Iranian cities.

Information is limited by government restrictions on foreign and opposition media, but the clashes have resulted in at least 8 and possibly as many as 15 deaths, and left scores injured. Official spokesmen claim that dozens of police officers, including the commander of the Teheran police, have been injured and “some killed.”

The dead protesters include a nephew of Mir Hossein Mousavi, a former prime minister of the Islamic Republic and the main challenger to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in last June’s presidential election. Ali-Habibi Mousavi was reportedly shot in the back during anti-government protests Sunday. Opposition supporters have termed his death a targeted assassination.

Police admit to having arrested 300 protesters Sunday. Yesterday, security forces arrested top aides of Mousavi and Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s president from 1997 to 2005. They also took Ebrahim Yazdi, the current head of Mehdi Bazargan’s Freedom Movement of Iran, into custody.

Six months after Iran’s disputed June 12 presidential election, the government headed by Islamic Guardian Ayatollah Khamanei and President Ahmadinejad has manifestly failed to quell the opposition challenge to its legitimacy.

Government officials, including police chief Esmail Ahmadi-Moqadam, had vowed that they would stamp out any attempt by supporters of Mousavi’s “Green Revolution” to use Sunday’s commemorations of Ashura, a Shiite holy day long associated with political protest, to stage anti-government actions.

Yet tens and probably hundreds of thousands joined

anti-government protests, including in Esfahan and Najafabad—cities in central Iran that had been considered government strongholds. While many of the protesters wore green, thereby identifying themselves with Mousavi’s call for reform of the Islamic Republic, many also took up slogans that directly challenged its existence, including “Death to the Dictator!” A report in the *New York Times* said the opposition protests have begun to attract participants from working class south Teheran.

The protagonists of the Green Revolution—Mousavi, Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani, the billionaire capitalist, ex-president, and current head of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council—are all pillars of the Islamic Republic. But they now find themselves in the nominal leadership of a movement that seems to be taking on a quasi-insurrectional character.

Iran’s bourgeois clerical establishment has fractured under the impact of the world economic crisis, the mounting social contradictions of the Islamic Republic, and unrelenting pressure from US imperialism.

According to the *Economist*, Iran’s economy grew just 0.5 percent in the past year, as oil revenue slumped from \$82 billion in 2008 to less than \$60 billion. Official figures place inflation at over 15 percent and unemployment at more than 11 percent.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad captured the presidency by posing as an opponent of the neo-liberal policies pursued by his predecessors, Khatami and Rafsanjani. In fact he pressed forward with privatization, selling off some \$63 billion in government assets, although, to the chagrin of Rafsanjani and other bazaar capitalists, much of the bounty went not to them, but to businessmen with close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

To offset pressure from below, Ahmadinejad used the

increased state revenues that resulted from the 2005-2008 oil boom to boost social spending. This policy was bitterly resented by powerful sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie, and under the impact of the economic crisis Ahmadinejad has been forced to announce plans for radical economic restructuring, involving the phasing out of food, energy, water, transport and other subsidies. This has failed to satisfy his critics within the Iranian elite, who denounce him for promoting welfare dependency.

There are also sharp divisions over how to pursue the Iranian bourgeoisie's great power ambitions in the Persian Gulf region under conditions of unrelenting hostility from US imperialism.

Over the past two decades, Washington has repeatedly rebuffed Iranian offers for the normalization of relations and a "grand bargain." Instead, under Clinton, George W. Bush and now Obama, it has ratcheted up pressure on Teheran through sanctions, the promotion of "regime change," and threats of military action. Today, the US is waging war in three countries bordering Iran—Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan—and is threatening, come January 1, to rally the other great powers to impose new and "crippling" sanctions against Teheran.

Last spring, with some fanfare, President Obama offered to "engage" with Teheran. But as both he and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained, this in no way represented a softening of US demands that Teheran abandon its nuclear fuel program and, more generally, accept American dominance in the Middle East. Rather, it was an attempt to exploit the fissures in the Iranian elite and lay the diplomatic groundwork for an escalation of sanctions.

Eight months later, the Obama administration is preparing to go beyond Bush and Cheney by pressing for a world gasoline export embargo on Iran, which, given Teheran's dependence on imported gasoline, would deliver a body blow to its economy.

At the same time, it is encouraging the "Green Revolution," whose leaders—especially Rafsanjani and Khatami—have long been publicly identified with the push for a rapprochement with Washington.

The Iranian working class must take advantage of this crisis to mount its own challenge to the Islamic Republic. The precondition for such a challenge is opposition to, and independence from, all factions of

the bourgeoisie.

The Western media, with the virtual unanimous support of middle-class organizations that have lined up behind Obama to make their peace with imperialism, have proclaimed Iran's bourgeois opposition a "democratizing" movement.

But the basic needs of the Iranian people—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs, public services and social equality—will not be achieved by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie, let alone one, as in the case of the leaders of the "Green Revolution," that is eager to make a bargain with US imperialism and is pressing for more radical anti-working class socio-economic policies.

The tragedy of contemporary Iran is that the mighty anti-imperialist revolution of 1978-79 was hijacked and perverted by the bourgeoisie through a section of the clergy spouting Shia populism and Iranian nationalism.

What made this possible was the criminal policies pursued by the Tudeh, Iran's Stalinist party. It subordinated the working class to the forces grouped around Ayatollah Khomeini, claiming that, as Iran is an oppressed country of belated capitalist development, the Iranian revolution could not go beyond the "bourgeois-democratic" stage.

Thirty years on, the lessons of this vital experience must be brought to the Iranian working class and serve to guide a revolutionary challenge to the Islamic Republic based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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