

Iran's Green movement in disarray

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Iran's bourgeois opposition Green movement has been thrown into disarray by its failure to make good on its threat to stage mass protests on February 11—the 31st anniversary of the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi's US-sponsored dictatorship.

Green supporters in and outside Iran had vowed to upstage the official celebrations. Some had even forecast the impending downfall of the regime led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Mohsen Sazegara, a one-time high official of the Islamic Republic who now appears regularly on Voice of America's Persian-language broadcasts, proclaimed February 11 “decisive—a day on which the presence of the opposition in their millions can change the balance of power in their favour.”

These hopes were shared by the US ruling elite, which has mounted a three-decade-long campaign to overthrow the Islamic Republic. In a February 11 editorial titled “Showdown in Tehran,” the *Washington Post* declared, “If [the government] once again fails to stop thousands of protesters from taking to the streets of Tehran and other cities, the West will know that the extremist group that stands behind Iran's drive for the bomb is one step closer to collapse.”

But to the dismay of the Western media, Iran's government was able to marginalize the Green protests by mobilizing millions of its own supporters and mounting a massive security operation.

Government threats and intimidation, the arrest of oppositionists and the disruption of telecommunications had a significant impact on the size of the Green protests. But the fizzling of the February 11 Green mobilization was first and foremost a product of its privileged class character and right-wing political orientation.

The Green movement is led by disaffected sections of Iran's bourgeois-clerical establishment and lacks any genuine mass support beyond better-off sections of the urban middle class. Its recognized leaders, former prime minister Hossein Mousavi, former Majlis (parliament) speaker Medhi Karroubi, and former president Mohammad Khatami, have all held leading posts in the Islamic Republic.

The principal bankroller of Mousavi's lavishly-funded June 2009 presidential campaign was Hashemi Rafsanjani—a former president, the current head of two key state institutions, and reputedly Iran's wealthiest businessman.

Rafsanjani, Iran's president from 1989 to 1997, and Khatami, president from 1997 to 2005, implemented neo-liberal economic policies that dramatically increased poverty and social inequality, while they sought a rapprochement with the US and the European powers.

Those who poured into the streets last June to protest the purported theft of the presidential election came overwhelmingly from affluent north Tehran neighbourhoods, as was readily admitted by such champions of the Green movement as the *New York Times* and CNN.

There is growing worker discontent and unrest in Iran—over unpaid wages, the replacement of permanent jobs with contract labor, and the government's plan to phase out price subsidies on energy, food and other essential goods and services.

The Green opposition, however, has proven unable and unwilling to make any appeal to the Iranian working class and urban and rural poor. While Green supporters bristle at the mores and dress codes imposed by the Islamic establishment, many are indifferent and downright hostile to the socioeconomic grievances and aspirations of Iran's toilers. A major complaint of the opposition is that Ahmadinejad squandered the revenue from the 2005-2008 oil boom on social welfare programs.

In a recent letter to Green supporters, Mousavi conceded that the Green movement is alienated from the masses. “Before the Revolution,” wrote Mousavi, “it was a principle that the revolutionary forces and the academic class defended the lower class. It was their honor to be the poor people's friend. ... I regret that the intense political problems resulted in less attention to the lower class of the society, their problems and their rights.”

The Western media and political establishment, including their “left” flank, have held the alleged stealing of the election from Mousavi to be incontestable—so incontestable that evidence need not be marshaled to prove it. But a recently released study conducted under the auspices of the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy

Attitudes demonstrates that opinion polls taken before and after the June election—by experts from Tehran University and US-based organizations—show that Ahmadinejad enjoyed majority support.

Last week, in a rare candid moment, Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations and an advocate of regime-change in Iran, admitted to CNN that there was no proof Mousavi had won the election or even that he was supported by more than 25 percent of Iranians.

A February 15 *New York Times* article sheds light on the character of the opposition and its crisis. The Green leadership's attempts to contain the protests so that they serve the objective of securing a realignment in the policies and personnel of the Islamic Republic has alienated many young oppositionists. Even more significantly, the *Times* report points to the movement's dependence on logistical and political support from outside Iran.

The embrace of the Green movement by the Western media and governments was long in the making. It was the result of a calculated attempt to exploit fissures that had developed in the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic under the weight of deepening social contradictions in Iran and relentless imperialist pressure in the form of the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which border Iran, and US-led economic sanctions.

The calculation that the US could find ready partners within the Iranian elite was founded in history. Under Rafsanjani and Khatami, Iran had repeatedly sought to reestablish diplomatic relations with Washington, only to be rebuffed by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

The last of these overtures, as documented in Trita Parsi's book *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States*, came shortly after the US's March 2003 invasion of Iraq and took the form of a "grand bargain." Tehran reportedly offered not only to assist the US in Iraq, but to cut off arms to Hezbollah, end support for Hamas, and recognize Israel in all but name, in exchange for the US lifting sanctions and providing Tehran with security guarantees.

An Iranian émigré, Parsi was once an aide to Republican Congressman Bob Ney, who acted as an intermediary in delivering the Iranian government's 2003 offer to the Bush administration.

Today Parsi is the president of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), a self-proclaimed representative of Iranian-Americans and a vocal proponent of the Green movement.

In a memo, titled "How Washington Can Really Help the Greens in Iran" and co-written by Parsi and Rand Corporation analyst Alireza Nader, the NIAC applauds the

Obama administration for opting for targeted sanctions against Iran's Revolutionary Guards and argues that emphasizing military threats or reaching a quick deal on the nuclear issue will damage US interests by undermining Iran's bourgeois opposition. "The green movement," declares the memo, "will not and cannot adjust its action plan to suit the US political timetable. But if patience is granted—which includes avoiding a singular focus on the nuclear issue at the expense of all other considerations—Washington will access a far greater potential for change."

Aware that in pursuit of the class interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie, the Ahmadinejad-Khamane'i regime is being forced by the economic crisis and US-led sanctions to pursue increasingly right-wing policies—including the elimination of subsidies and privatization—sections of the Greens and their imperialist backers are now hoping to exploit working class discontent.

Thus Mousavi has urged his followers to "become more integrated with [the underprivileged] classes, and pursue their concerns and demands."

Meanwhile, Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA operative and fellow of the neo-conservative Foundation for Democracies think tank, enthuses in a *New York Times* op-ed piece that Ahmadinejad's increasingly right-wing economic policy may enable the opposition to "draw into the streets larger numbers of the mostazafan, 'the oppressed poor,' who have been the popular bedrock of the regime since the 1979 revolution."

No doubt there were well-meaning and sincere (though politically naïve) young people who, out of opposition to the repressive Islamic regime, became caught up in the Green movement. They should now draw the requisite lessons.

Above all, the working class must not allow its opposition to the regime to be subordinated to any section of the Iranian bourgeoisie. Genuine democracy will be established only through the mobilization of the working class and oppressed masses to secure their social interests on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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