

Iran: Anti-government protests abate in face of mass repression

By Jordan Shilton and Keith Jones
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The wave of anti-government protests by unemployed youth and impoverished workers that swept across Iran for at least five days beginning December 28 has now abated.

While the clerical political establishment has staged a week of large counter-demonstrations and security forces are proclaiming that the challenge to Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime has been successfully quelled, none of the acute socio-economic problems that propelled tens of thousands to take to the streets of more than 80 cities and towns have been attenuated, let alone resolved. It is only a matter of time before working class anger and opposition bursts forth anew.

The Iranian regime responded to the protests, which were driven by anger over food-price increases, mass joblessness, pervasive social inequality and years of government austerity, with repression. Police and security forces killed over 20 protesters and arrested many hundreds more.

The government has justified the security crackdown with spurious claims US imperialism and its allies fomented and manipulated the unrest.

Yesterday, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued a statement saying, "Iran's revolutionary people along with tens of thousands of Basij forces (IRGC affiliated militia), police and the Intelligence Ministry" have broken the protest movement. Iranian authorities admit to arresting more than a thousand people, although they claim many have now been released after swearing to forego further "anti-state" activity.

The government and its supporters have tried to equate the protests with the 2009 Green Movement, which, egged on by the US and European imperialist powers, challenged the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But that movement was aimed at bringing to power the faction of the bourgeois elite most eager for rapprochement with Washington and drew its support overwhelmingly from the most privileged sections of Iranian society.

The current movement, whatever its political confusion, erupted against poverty and social inequality, mobilizing elements from the most oppressed layers of the population. Particularly noteworthy was its rapid spread to smaller district cities and towns that have traditionally provided a base of support for the regime, but have been ravaged by lack of investment and drought in the surrounding countryside.

Moreover, the events of the past week-and-a-half were preceded by months of worker protests, sit-ins and strikes against job cuts and the failure of employers to pay back wages and benefits.

Iranian authorities have seized on the utterly hypocritical and fatuous claims of the Trump administration, fronted by a barrage of tweets from the president himself, of "support" for the protests to lend an air of truth to their charges of imperialist subversion. On Friday, the US forced a UN Security Council debate on developments in Iran.

The efforts of the billionaire would-be despot Trump to cast himself as a friend of the Iranian people would be risible were the US demonization of the Islamic Republic not bound up with its predatory war plans against Iran. Not only has Trump moved to blow up the Iran civil nuclear deal with the world's major powers, the recently released US National Security Strategy places Iran on a par with North Korea as a "threat" to American dominance that must be countered and vanquished.

The key mobilizing theme of the Iranian regime's rallies against the internal unrest has been opposition to the threats and bullying of Iran by the US and its regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The rallies have also targeted Britain, which held Iran in semi-colonial bondage in the first half of the 20th century, only to be supplanted by the US after the CIA restored the Shah to power in 1953. London has been Washington's staunchest ally in the quarter-century of ruinous US wars in the Middle East. The pro-government rallies have resounded with chants of "Death to America," "Death to Britain" and "Death to Zionism."

The anti-imperialist sentiments of many of the pro-government demonstrators, fueled as it is by decades of US aggression against Iran and the people of the Middle East, were no doubt genuine. But the Islamic Republic's bourgeois-clerical elite—as underscored by numerous overtures to Washington stretching back to at least 1989—would be more than willing to reach an accommodation with the US if only it abandoned its drive for regime-change and recognized Tehran as a junior partner in stabilizing the Middle East.

A key aim of the anti-working class austerity policies of the current Iranian government led by President Hassan Rouhani is to woo European and ultimately US investment. Since coming

to power in August 2013, the Rouhani administration has accelerated privatization and slashed social spending, while rewriting the rules governing investment in the oil sector to satisfy Total, Shell, Eni, and other European energy giants.

The government's proposed budget for next year would cut \$5.3 billion in income support for poorer Iranians, raise gasoline (petrol) prices by as much as 50 percent, expand privatization of education and cut infrastructure spending by \$3.1 billion. This in a country where, according to a report published in the IRGC's own political organ, *Sobhe Sadeq*, 50 percent of the people live below the poverty line.

A study conducted by BBC Persian found Iranians are 15 percent poorer than they were a decade ago. The consumption of bread, milk and red meat has dropped by 30 to 50 percent, as growing numbers of families can no longer afford them. Meanwhile, as around the world, the income and wealth chasm between the richest 1 and 10 percent of Iranians and the rest of the population has widened.

The eruption of the anger of the long-suppressed Iranian working class at the end of 2017 took the regime by surprise. As the protests expanded across Iran on the weekend of December 30-31 and took a pronounced anti-government turn, with participants taking up slogans challenging the institutions of the Islamic Republic and clashing with security forces, Iran's security apparatus was rapidly mobilized. Important social media platforms were suspended, and police, Basij and, in some cases, IRGC units deployed.

Repression alone, however, does not account for the sudden ebbing of the protests. The overwhelmingly young and predominantly working class demonstrators lacked a clear and worked-out political perspective.

As the regime was quick to exploit, monarchist and ultra-right-wing elements tried to latch onto the protests and misdirect them. This included not only raising reactionary slogans, but no doubt also encouraging protesters into precipitous attacks on government property and security forces.

That such elements could find any support is not the fault of the working class, but of the regime. For decades, Iranian workers have been denied any form of genuine self-organization and political self-expression.

The Islamic Republic was consolidated through the derailing of the mass anti-imperialist movement that overthrew the blood-soaked, US-sponsored regime of the Shah in 1979. After executing a few exemplars of the Shah's tyrannical rule, the Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters concentrated their energies on defusing the threat from the working class of socialist revolution. While some social concessions were made, this operation principally and increasingly took the form of savage suppression of all socialist and left parties and of the workers' councils that had emerged in the many worker-occupied factories.

The attempt of ultra-right elements to leverage the protests that erupted December 28 and, above all, the lack of a clear

counter-perspective articulating opposition to imperialism and all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie caused broader sections of the working class, as well as middle class layers otherwise sympathetic to the protesters' social grievances, to remain on the sidelines amid the mounting repression.

One indication of the character of the debate now taking place in Iran is the discussion reportedly raging on social media under the rival hashtags, "We will not become Syria" and "We will become Tunisia."

The regime also, it should be underlined, rushed to reassure the public that the popular anger over price rises and poverty had been heard, even as it slandered the protests as foreign-fomented. Both government spokesmen and leading members of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) have promised that changes will be made.

"As concerns petrol prices, we must absolutely take into account the situation of the people because the tensions are absolutely not in the interests of the country," said Majlis Speaker and leading Principlist Ali Larijani last week.

All factions of Iran's deeply divided ruling elite have united to support the suppression of working class unrest. But, in a stark indication of the depth of the crisis, the various factions are now fighting over who is to blame for the deep-rooted popular alienation and anger. There are unconfirmed media reports that former president Ahmadinejad was arrested over the weekend. Some of Ahmadinejad's rivals have accused him of initially lending support to the protests as a means of advancing his own factional interests.

Infighting within the regime and above all the ever-widening class divide, under the impact of the world economic crisis and US bullying and aggression, ensure that sooner rather than later working class anger and opposition will re-erupt.

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