

# Crisis of the Iranian regime and popular mobilisation

Backing popular upsurge key task for international left

Wednesday 15 July 2009, by [KIA Babak](#) (Date first published: 4 July 2009).

**Thanks to a huge, planned electoral fraud, Iran's outgoing president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was declared victor in the first round of the country's presidential elections, with an unlikely score. As the height of irony, the regime itself recognised irregularities concerning 3 million votes. In 170 electoral districts the official figures gave a rate of participation going from 95% to 140%!**

## Contents

- [Dynamic of the popular mobilis](#)
- [Division of ruling élites](#)
- [What does Ahmadinejad represen](#)
- ["Anti-imperialism of fools"](#)

If the Council of Guardians of the Constitution authorised four candidates from within the establishment to run, the "Supreme Guide" had designated the victor well before the first round. In carrying out a veritable coup d'état intended to sideline from power the so called "reformist" and "pragmatic" factions close to the former presidents Khatami and Rafsandjani, Ahmadinejad and the "Supreme Guide", Ali Khamenei, have opened a crisis at the summit of the regime. Faced with this acceleration of the political game, the defeated candidates, Mohsen Rézaï, historic leader of the Guardians of the Revolution, Mehdi Karroubi, former president of the Parliament and Mir Hossein Moussavi, former prime minister (1981-1989), have entered into a showdown with the Guide and his protégé. This conflict has unleashed a new episode of internal struggle opposing the different factions. This gaping fracture at the summit of the state has opened a breach through which the democratic aspirations of Iranian youth, women and workers have poured. The dynamic of popular mobilisations deeply destabilises the edifice of the Islamic Republic and for the first time the "Supreme Guide" has become the target of the demonstrators.

In supporting Ahmadinejad well before the vote and characterising his re-election as a "divine miracle", Ali Khamenei has just dealt a significant blow to his own function. The Supreme Guide is the first personage of the state. He directs the key organs of the regime, the armed forces, notably the Guardians of the Revolution (Sepah-e Pasdaran) and the Islamist militias (Bassidjis), the state media, the legal apparatus, and he monitors the executive power.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic is based on the Velâyat-e faghih, the government of the legal expert, incarnation of divine power and the domination of the religious over the political. As a general rule, the "Guide", who traces the guiding lines of the regime's policies, has the mission of arbitrating between the different factions. But in taking part in the coup d'état against the "reformist" camp, Khamenei has thrown all his weight into the balance and exposed himself to popular rejection. He thus strengthens the position of those who think that the regime is not

reformable.

## **Dynamic of the popular mobilisations**

The dynamic of the mobilisation, which initially was centred on the denunciation of the massive electoral fraud, tends today to challenge the Islamic Republic as a whole. The slogan “death to the dictator!” is addressed as much to Ahmadinejad as to Khamenei. However the only consolation for the mullahs is that the legal opposition to the clan of the “conservatives” and fundamentalists (Ogul Garayan), led by the Supreme Guide and Ahmadinejad, do not intend to challenge the bases of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, the so called “reformist” opposition, represented by Mir Hossein Moussavi and Karroubi, wish to rest on the wave of popular opposition, while confining it in the current institutional framework. Far from controlling the dynamic of the street, the “reformists” would like to channel the popular mobilisation and use it against their adversaries.

Despite the repression and media blackout organised by the regime the popular mobilisation continues. Demonstrations are attempted in Teheran and in the big cities. The regime seeks to impose a significant degree of violence so as to smother the mobilisation. The big cities are in a quasi permanent state of emergency, with blocking of the main roads and filtering of traffic. The Guardians of the Revolution and the Basijis occupy the key points of Teheran. So as to avoid a direct confrontation with the militia and the Pasdaran, the population finds various forms of action, but doesn’t cede an inch. Calls for strikes, including a general strike, have multiplied but their extension has been until now limited by repression and the absence of trade union rights and independent unions.

At the head of these initiatives are the employees of the enterprises and services which have mobilised most in recent years, like those of the public transport company in Teheran (Sherkat-e Vahed) or Iran Khodro (the biggest carmaker in the country with 60,000 workers) as well as those in health or the universities. Contrary to a vision spread outside of Iran by Ahmadinejad supporters, the social mobilisation involves youth, women and workers. One of the characteristics of the current movement is that, unlike in 1999, the students are not alone in confronting the regime. When they can take place, the demonstrations in Teheran take place in the south of the city, in the popular neighbourhoods and cross the capital towards the north.

The human chain that its inhabitants tried to organise on Monday June 29 was to extend over twelve kilometres. This initiative, little related by the media, was partially successful despite the attacks of the riot squads. Each evening, the roofs of Teheran resonate with slogans launched by the population, leading to regular forays by the militias into the residences. Of course, the absence of revolutionary leadership and independent organisation at the political and trade union level constitute a real handicap. However, the dynamic of mobilisation and radicalisation underway will not be without consequence. Because even if the regime succeeds in retaking control of the street, its loss of legitimacy opens a situation of profound and durable instability.

The Iranian people are paying a heavy price for courageously opposing the Islamic Republic. More than two hundred dead, hundreds of wounded, nearly two thousand arrests and news that detainees are being tortured so as to make public “confessions” of “links with foreigners”.

## **Division of ruling élites**

In a rare event, several grand ayatollahs like Ali Montazeri, Nasser Makarem Chirazi, Assadollah

Zanjani, Moussavi Ardebili or grand ayatollah Sanaïe have expressed their concern as to the loss of legitimacy of the regime. Some, like grand ayatollah Ali Montaezeri, supported the demonstrators. Indeed, those who know the Shiite world know that the religious and moral authority of these grand ayatollahs is superior to that of the “guide”. In the doctrinal system of Shiism, they are “marjaas” (poles of imitation for the faithful, which is not the case with Ali Khamenei who was raised to the rank of Ayatollah so as to accede to the post of Guide). These positions taken by the higher clergy witness to the importance of this crisis which broadly transcends the “simple” issue of electoral fraud.

The current situation is only the culmination of a long and complex process which has taken place inside the regime on the one hand, and in Iranian society on the other.

With the usurpation of the 1979 Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini and the creation of the Islamic Republic, a two headed institutional system was set up, together with a hypertrophy of institutions and religious functions. Thus, parallel to the theocratic nature of the regime, there are institutions of a republican character. In Iran, elections (municipal, parliamentary and above all presidential) are not held for the purpose of representation, inasmuch as they are obviously not democratic. Opponents of the Islamic Republic do not have the right to exist politically and the candidates are selected in advance by a higher body of the regime, in the event the Council of Guardians of the Constitution.

These elections have another, more fundamental, objective: the legitimating of a “revolutionary” regime which wishes to be popular and present itself as massively supported by the citizens. Indeed, there is a permanent tension between a regime which, while awaiting the reappearance of the Mahdi (the 12<sup>th</sup> imam, who disappeared in the year 874) defines itself as the emanation of God (the Velâyat-é faghih) and “representative” institutions and functions (Parliament, President of the Republic as “expressions of popular sovereignty”). From the dismissal of Bane Sadri by Khomeini a year after his election in 1981 to the permanent conflict between Khatami and Khamenei from 1997 to 2005, this contradiction persists as it has since the earliest days of the Islamic Republic.

In the Islamic Republic both clergy and lay persons, in the manner of Ahmadinejad, justify their action by religious “theorisations”. Each of the factions thus develops its own explanations which can develop according to the conjuncture and reflect shifting alliances. However, for more than ten years, a profound debate has been going on among Iran’s clergy. This debate is linked to the bipolar aspect of the Iranian political system and the rise of the democratic and social aspirations of the population.

Some religious dignitaries, very much in the minority, advocate a separation between the religious and the political. Their concern stems from the desire to preserve Islam from the risks of political power. These ideas have influenced some student activist circles.

Other positions, supported within the ruling cabal by Moussavi and Karoubi notably, stress “popular sovereignty”. The so-called “reformist” factions think that the Velâyat-e faghih should be elected and that universal suffrage and the choice of the people constitute the basis of the Islamic state.

### **What does Ahmadinejad represent?**

Ahmadinejad, inspired by some influential members of the clergy like Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi or Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, considers that Islamic government should be based on the principles of Islamic faith. Thus, in 1998, Mahdavi Kani said that “for us, each government whose governor is designated and determined by God is legitimate even if the population does not accept it, and, on the

other hand, each government whose governor is not designated by God is illegitimate and a usurper, even if the population accepts it". The latter do not talk of the Islamic Republic but rather of the Islamic Government. The so called "pragmatic" faction incarnated by Rafsandjani, the richest man in Iran and reputedly the most corrupt, defends an intermediary position, according primacy to the Guide while insisting on "popular participation".

The current political crisis reflects the attempt of the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad camp to se dismantle universal suffrage which, until these elections, allowed different factions to carve up and share power. In "freeing" itself from it, the Ahmadinejad clan intends to control totally the state apparatus as well as economic and financial resources. These theorisations on the question of Islamic government have only one function: to justify the grip of the Pasdaran and a section of the clergy on the wealth of the country, to toughen still further the regime so as to contain the revival of social and democratic struggles and to eliminate from the regime all the other factions. Indeed, in the competition raging inside the ruling cabal, the desire of the "reformers", close to the private industrial sector, to open the Iranian market more to foreign investors and break up state monopolies in the hands of the Pasdaran sharpens the conflict for the control of the regime.

The popular upsurge and the war which the different clans and fractions of the bourgeoisie are waging have intensified under the pressure of the world crisis of capitalism. Partisans of economic deregulation and a strengthened insertion of Iran in capitalist globalisation, the "reformers", come up against the bureaucratic-mafia interests of the Guardians of the Revolution.

The ascent of the Guardians of the Revolution has taken place progressively. To reduce this body to an elite ideological army devoted to the Guide would be much exaggerated. The leadership of the Sepah, which has a preponderant political and economic place, intends to direct the state and serve its own interests. The Pasdaran actively support Ahmadinejad who has made himself part of this elite body. He represents their interests at the summit of the state. The real social base of Ahmadinejad is made up of the traditional layers around the Bazaar who play an unavoidable economic role, the Bassidjis and their family, a part of the higher state bureaucracy and all those who form part of the civil organisations directed or financed by the Pasdaran. The latter control various economic and financial activities.

From building to leisure activities via the oil and weapons sectors, nothing escapes them. Their area of activity has no limits, even smuggling and the organisation of prostitution networks for the oil monarchies of the Gulf. They have in their hands, besides firepower, a considerable financial power. By its grip on the Foundations (Bonyad) — the bodies created after the revolution of 1979 to manage property expropriated from the dignitaries of the Shah — the leadership of the Pasdaran is one of the major actors in economic life. The Foundations amount to holdings in very varied activities and are among the most powerful companies in the Middle East. They represent more than 40% of GDP outside of oil income. A veritable state within a state, the Foundations are outside the control of the administration and are vectors of corruption and clientelism. Only a few people, including the Guide Ali Khamenei, are informed of their activity and that of the Pasdaran.

The argument according to which Ahmadinejad would be the representative of the more deprived layers is not supported by any tangible element. As shown by numerous surveys, his victory during the presidential elections of 2005 was not the result of the vote of the impoverished layers as is too often portrayed, including by the Western left.

In relating Ahmadinejad's electoral support in 2005 to unemployment rates, the least developed departments and regions or the rural world one can easily see that his score was mediocre. In fact Ahmadinejad won in 2005 by resting on popular disillusionment in relation to the "reformers" and thanks to the territorial networking ensured by the Bassidjis and Pasdaran as well as the links

between the economic and military activities of the Guardians of the Revolution.

His first term was marked by a massive privatisation plan which benefited those close to him, but also by a dizzying rise in inflation (30% per year) and by a significant rise in unemployment. The clientelist use of the oil rent (Iran is not a case apart in this sense), which ensures the support of certain pauperised social layers, was not enough. Indeed, the latter lost more through inflation than they received via the arbitrary redistribution of a part of the oil manna. The dilapidation of the oil income, which represents 85% of export income and 75% of budgetary income, has prevented any modernisation of infrastructures. In the absence of refining capacity Iran imports 40% of its petrol consumption. Wages have never been squeezed so much and this despite the higher barrel price and the increased oil income of the country. To obtain payment of their wages both public and private sector workers have increasingly had to resort to strike movements. Each time, Ahmadinejad and those around him have responded by repression and arrests. Far from breaking the determination of the workers, repression has had as a consequence a growing radicalisation among youth, feminist activists and the working class in general.

In a country of nearly 71.2 million inhabitants, where youth represent 67.9% of the population, the absence of social perspectives and spaces of liberty represents an explosive cocktail for the regime. The corruption of the clergy and the guardians of the revolution, the political, economic and social violence imposed by the regime of the mullahs have largely contributed to the loss of legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. The political sequence underway with the fraudulent elections, the support from the Guide for Ahmadinejad and the violence of the repression accentuate the factors of rejection of the existing order.

### **“Anti-imperialism of fools”**

Rejected massively in its symbolic, ideological, social and political dimension, the Islamic Republic now only survives through the exercise of violence. Indeed, the demonstrations of recent weeks witness to it, the fear of denouncing the regime as a whole has gone. Faced with the breadth of the mobilisation Khamenei and Ahmadinejad try to appeal to the nationalist feelings of Iranians. Denouncing foreign conspiracies, the ruling clan seeks to isolate the demonstrators and to free its hands for a blind repression, in the name of the defence of the interests of the nation. Obviously one should not be duped. The imperialist powers have long coveted the wealth of the country. If they can act and install a regime more favourable to their interests they will do it. It should however be noted that at this stage no imperialist power proposes to break diplomatically with the Islamic Republic. As for Obama, he continues his “outstretched hand” policy.

Beyond this, the best way of counteracting the imperialist projects is not to support Ahmadinejad and company, but to build a movement of international solidarity with the Iranian people. It would be aberrant to analyse the crisis opened today in Iran as the expression of an imperialist conspiracy or to understand the mobilisations against electoral fraud as support for a pro imperialist faction, going so far as to justify the repression. If the Iranian people reject any imperialist interference, neither are they disposed to accept a reactionary, brutal and corrupt theocratic regime any longer. It has enough reasons to go onto the streets. Young people, women, workers do not cease to struggle for equality, social justice and democratic rights.

In line with the positions taken by Iranian left activists, it is necessary to support the popular mobilisations, to provide a point of support for those who struggle in Iran and this without backing this or that faction. Some on the left internationally affirm that the millions of persons (3 million demonstrators in the streets of Teheran on June 15), who physically confront the riot squads and

other thugs of the regime, are manipulated by the US, Israel or Britain. The conspiracy theory ignores the real bases of the crisis which relate primarily to internal factors. Nor does it take account of the specific conditions of politicisation in a context where the dictatorship has dismantled all political and trade union organisations.

These positions borrow from an approach which in other times which has done great damage in the international workers' movement. The theory that "my enemies' enemies are my friends" has led certain sectors to support Stalinism, indeed to seek unnatural alliances with the far right. It is unthinkable for anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist activists to denounce the state of Israel by making any kind of concessions to discourse of the anti-Semitic type. To accredit the idea that Ahmadinejad is an anti-imperialist leader is to forget the role played by the Iranian regime in the relative stabilisation of Iraq. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the supports of the puppet Iraqi prime minister Al Maliki, installed by US imperialism.

Today, the Islamic Republic participates, as the guest of the United States, in international conferences concerning the stabilisation of Afghanistan. What kind of anti-imperialism which collaborates with the forces of occupation? The US administration knows that the leaders of the Islamic Republic share the same position concerning the nuclear questions. Ahmadinejad, like the other presidential candidates, can adopt a tough surface language and negotiate in the corridors. Moreover in the area of foreign policy, there are no deep differences between the factions. The first Ahmadinejad term in this area has been no different from that of its predecessors. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is as much dictated by its interests on the regional and international scene as by the necessity of the regime to firm up its social base around a populist-nationalist discourse.

From the fatwa affair launched by Khomeini against Salman Rushdie via Ahmadinejad's speeches denying the holocaust, each time the Islamic Republic has undergone difficulties, its leaders have sought to create a tension on the international plane so as to mask the gravity of the crisis. Khomeini's virulence during the 1980s with respect to the "Great Satan" and its Israeli ally did not stop the Islamic Republic from buying US arms and having them delivered by the Zionist state. The vision according to which a crisis of the regime or a change of regime in Iran would be a defeat for the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance and would play into Israel's smacks of an "anti-imperialism of fools".

The Israeli state has nothing to fear from Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic ravings. On the contrary, the Israeli leaders seize on the emotion created by the Iranian president's words to justify and accentuate their colonial policy against the Palestinian people. It is not enough to finance this or that organisation of the Palestinian resistance to win the stripes of anti-Zionism or anti-imperialism, in which case the Gulf monarchies and the corrupt Arab regimes would be classed in this category.

An anti-imperialist like James Petras claims that "neo-conservatives, libertarian conservatives and Trotskyites joined the Zionists in hailing the opposition protestors as the advance guard of a democratic revolution". Without saying a word on the contradictions at work in Iran, or the legitimacy of the mobilisations and aspirations for democratic and social rights, for gender equality, Petras and many others have allowed themselves to be blinded by the grotesque bluster of Ahmadinejad.

Accentuating the confusion, Hugo Chavez's positions in support of Ahmadinejad reflect an approach to the construction of a relation of forces which rests more on the cynical diplomacy of states than on popular mobilisations. They basically reflect a narrow conception where control of oil prices appears as a strategic economic weapon in the consolidation of positions conquered in relation to imperialism, whereas the only serious and progressive road lies in the development of popular, social and democratic mobilisations.

Yet as we know consistent anti-imperialism is situated alongside the peoples who struggle for their emancipation. Our anti-imperialist struggle cannot be dissociated from the fight for social justice, the sovereignty of peoples and against all forms of oppression and exploitation. Realpolitik and selective denunciation should not form part of our methods of analysis and struggle. These are the weapons of the bourgeoisie. In this respect we should salute the appeal signed by a good number of left activist intellectuals, including Daniel Bensaïd, Noam Chomsky and Alain Badiou supporting the Iranian people in the struggle against the dictatorship without making any concession to the imperialist powers. The Iranian people should not remain isolated. They need our solidarity!

---

**P.S.**

\* Translation by International Viewpoint, V Online magazine : IV #414 - July/August 2009.

\* Babak Kia (pseudonym) is a member of the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA, France) and the Fourth International. He maintains numerous links in Iran. This article was first published on July 4, 2009