

# **An Iranian crisis of representation - A long-term revolutionary process**

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**The recent round of spontaneous protests against the petrol price hike has to be contextualized as part of the “long-term revolutionary process” in Iran.**

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The 2017-18 uprisings changed the Iranian political landscape for good. Since then, the Islamic Republic has entered into an ‘organic crisis’ par excellence. Introduced and described by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci a century ago, it is a comprehensive economic, political, social and ideological crisis, in which the ruling classes are no longer able to generate societal consensus. In an often-quoted phrase of his Prison Notebooks, he writes, ‘In this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’

Among the explicit morbid symptoms in the Islamic Republic are unemployment, stagflation, currency woes, corruption, and environmental degradation. However, there are other tacit symptoms that run through much of the population, the youth who are in-between immigration and unemployment, the students who have lost social aspirations, the workers who have been left to themselves, and above all the social fabric that is on the verge of disintegration.

The current round of protests in tens of towns and cities across the country is basically nothing but the continuation of the same socio-economic demands that have been put forward in the 2017-18 uprisings. At least 106 people have been killed in 21 cities and thousands injured and arrested during the first 3 days. There are some unverified speculations on the ground that says it is much more, reaching to over 200 slain protesters. The government has cut off the internet connectivity, with little to be known for the international community. This led to some misunderstandings among western spectators. With respect to these protests, we have to keep several points in mind.

## **It is not just about fuel price**

Firstly, there is a widespread misunderstanding in the English coverage of the issue that indicates the government has raised fuel prices by 50 percent per liter . This is just part of the story. The price of rationed gasoline rose 50 percent, but on a monthly 60 liters ration for each car. Over that limit, the price rose by 200 percent ), with devastating effects on the daily lives of people who have already had enough of forty years of a corrupt ruling class.

Secondly, many commentators have compared the Iranian petrol price to the international one,

framing the issue as “the removal of subsidies” instead of “increasing the price”, and hastily concluding that even now it still remains among the world’s cheapest. What is not understood here is the fact that the Iranian minimum wage (monthly \$125) is not paid in USD, not to mention concomitant inflation and the impact on price of other commodities. It seems unfair to produce petrol in Rials (using cheap labor, cheap oil, etc) and sell it in USD. In pricing systems, it is always a matter of ratio. Thirdly, the gasoline price hike has been justified by the governmental budget deficit. While 110 individuals have managed to secure collective facilities totaling \$9.2 billion unpaid outstanding loans from Iranian banks, the decision to hike the petrol price tends to irritate anyone who hear daily news of plunders and lootings by Iranian officials and their relatives. Rather than solicit oligarchic debts to ease budget gaps, the Islamic Republic planned to smash the living conditions of those who barely make ends meet to cover its public spending requirements.

Hiking petrol prices, however, was the last trigger that sparked the people’s anger, and has been functioning merely as a pretext to resist the impoverishment of the workers and the lower middle class. The fact that the protests were so quickly politicised demonstrates that those suppressed uprisings in 2017-18, did not wane. And the Islamic Republic’s organic crisis cannot be resolved within the existing system. For those on the streets, what is at stake is no longer the fuel prices, but forty years of an apartheid regime that has amalgamated varying types of racial and ethnic segregation with sexual, religious, and class discrimination against women, non-believers, and the underprivileged.

The political establishment that has ruled Iran for the last four decades, embodied by reformists and conservatives, has failed to address the crisis encompassing the system as a whole. It has now appealed to a new/old rhetoric of blaming the United States for its current crisis, reiterated among many pundits in Iran and beyond. The fact is, however, that this organic crisis has its own structural roots, embedded in the Islamic Republic’s four-decade political economy. The US sanctions served as a catalyst for this growing crisis.

### **A strident misalliance**

The very nature of the crisis stems from the misalliance between the political elites who took power immediately after the 1979 Revolution and the plutocratic oligarchy that managed to run the country after the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Soon after the 1979 Revolution, the religious forces that had taken over monopolized political power and formed a small circle of “insiders” (khodi) in opposition to the majority of “outsiders”. These insiders, the Shia-Persian-male minority, approximately 2,300 political personalities, have presided over Iranian politics for some forty years with every means at their disposal to eliminate every political dissident, reaching a peak with the 1988 Massacre.

Similarly, the Iranian economy has been dominated by that plutocratic oligarchy. Once Iran’s reconstruction following the 1980–88 war with Iraq had been put into practice, a tiny economic élite emerged that had strong ties with the political one and overlapped mostly with the ruling classes, from ministers and parliament members to clerical, judicial, and military leaders. Coupled together, the politico-economic oligarchy has plundered the whole national resources for decades. When it comes to privatization, urbanization, developmental projects, deindustrialization, deforestation, and banking system, the politicians were hand in glove with the economic oligarchy. Legislations were enacted by parliament members, for example, to provide their relatives with access to financial resources.

If the crisis is inscribed on the very construction of the post-revolutionary political economy, a fundamental deconstruction will be needed. Indeed, the regime is unable to achieve or even forge a

consensus within the same old socio-political coordinates. The 2017-18 uprisings have produced a vacuum in the field of ideological hegemony that is unlikely to be filled in a positive fashion by any of the existing forces in Iranian politics.

### **Crisis of representation**

The main reason is the interrelated crisis of political representation. Iranian post-revolutionary politics has been so petrified that popular mobilization might spiral out of hand. In fact, those considered as “outsiders” have little representational space, except for atomized and marginalized cultural activities. Though the four corners of the country are in turmoil and the workers are fed up with the privatization, deregulation and financialization, there is no political translation of these socio-economic grievances.

Since the 2017-18 uprisings, hundreds of protests took place by truckers, teachers, and workers, to mention the three most important ones. In late May 2018, thousands of truck drivers in dozens of Iranian provinces launched a strike over low wages which gained international support by their fellow travelers in the United States. On October 14-15, 2018, the first round of a nationwide sit-in was held by teachers against the privatization of education and low wages. It was followed by the second round of sit-ins across the country on November 13-14 that led to the arrest and interrogation of many teachers’ rights activists. Finally, yet most importantly, the successive strikes of workers in Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company in Khuzestan province, southwest of Iran, culminated in their last round of strikes with their definitive declaration against privatization, their determination to create and institute worker self-governed councils.

Shortly after, Esmail Bakhshi, the representative of the workers, was arrested, together with labor activists and workers, all of whom were sentenced to a total of 110 years in prison, including 14 years in prison and 74 lashes for Bakhshi himself. Simultaneously, journalists covering these protests are suffering incarceration under duress. In a most recent case, Marzieh Amiri, Shargh Daily economics reporter, was arrested on May 1, 2019, while she was covering a Labor Day demonstration in front of the Iranian parliament building in Tehran, and was sentenced consequently to 10 and a half years in prison and 148 lashes.

The recent round of spontaneous reactions to the petrol price hike has to be contextualized as another indication of the “long-term revolutionary process” in Iran. This is a multifaceted struggle against, on the one hand, the compulsory veiling, and, on the other hand, the corruption, embezzlement, privatization, deregulation and the pauperisation of the lower classes.

All of this has taken place in the absence of political organizations, civil society, free press, parties, unions, or leaders, and now surprisingly even the internet connectivity. These are spontaneous initiatives that workers and the lower-classes have embarked on, jeopardizing their life, in order to organize their unions or autonomous assemblies.

### **Misrepresentation and advertisement**

Amidst the Iranian struggle to escape from their far-reaching predicament, that is, the risky exercise of constantly testing and pushing the boundaries of state suppression, the morbid symptoms appear also at the level of representation. Namely, the self-proclaimed pundits who tend to give the usual regime spin on things. During the recent years, we have witnessed an increasing amount of interviews, op-eds, articles, and so on either from people belonging to the existing élite factions in

Iran or reflecting their views. They have high visibility both in Iranian politics and in the western media. If journalism is about one thing, it is to give voice to those whose voice have never been heard or stifled for some forty years. And these voices in today's Iran reside in the masses who poured spontaneously onto the streets of nearly 100 cities all around Iran in 2017-2018, those who are now fighting on the streets of over 100 towns and cities, those who have been injured and arrested during recent days, the martyrs who have been killed during three days of protests, as well as those who, being independent from the super-power tutelage, can legitimately claim to represent them.

The only way out of the ongoing grid-locked blockage is the formation of a self-determining alternative force that rejects any reconfiguration of the Islamic Republic with a human face by the reformists or centrists - a process of transition, already in its nascent state, from spontaneity to organization. If the crisis is a comprehensive organic one, the solution would be no less than comprehensive, including the emancipation of the Iranian society in its ideological, ethnic, gender diversity and above all, the Iranian women. This means that the prevailing economic crisis does not have an economic answer, but a political one, that is to move beyond the Islamic Republic toward a radical redistribution of wealth and power. It could hopefully lead to the solidarity of the people in the region, in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Iran to get rid of their life-long corrupt leaders.

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- Open Democracy, 22 November 2019 :  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/iranian-crisis-representation/>