

Increase in fuel prices and government crackdown: Why the Latest Uprising in Iran Matters

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Mass protests kicked off in Iran last month over an increase in fuel prices, resulting in a government crackdown in which over 7,000 protesters were arrested and 200 killed. An Iranian trade unionist explains what these protests have looked like on the ground and why leftists should support them.

On November 15, mass protests erupted across Iran in response to an increase in fuel prices. The government ordered a countrywide internet blackout. A week later, the internet was restored and evidence of brutal repression and murder by government forces reached the world. Amnesty International reports that over two hundred protesters have been killed and over seven thousand arrested in the past month. Michelle Bachelet, former president of Chile and current United Nations high commissioner for human rights, has confirmed these numbers and verified that Iranian security forces “shooting to kill” have used “severe violence” against protesters.

Iranian socialist activist and writer Frieda Afary has been working closely with activists in Iran. Emma Wilde Botta interviewed her about the recent protests, the government’s crackdown, and how the international left should support progressives and revolutionaries in the country.

Emma Wilde Botta (EWB)

The internet blackout has hindered the spread of accurate information. You’ve been in contact with activists and organizers on the ground. Describe the recent protests and the government’s response.

Frieda Afary (FA)

On November 15, over two hundred thousand people in mostly working-class areas rose up in over a hundred cities and rural areas throughout the country for four days of sustained protest following the announcement of the 300 percent rise in the price of petroleum. The protesters are predominantly unemployed and student youths, including many women.

The Iranian government and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responded by shooting people with the aim to kill, from rooftops, from military helicopters, and tanks. They arrested over seven thousand people and blocked the internet.

A New York Times report estimates the total number of deaths to be around 450 or higher. Another unconfirmed report from Iranian activists provides a list of 928 people who were killed by security forces during the protests. The number of deaths was highest in the provinces of Kurdistan and Khuzestan, each of which is home to oppressed national minorities. The New York Times reported on the murder of up to a hundred protesters in one day by the IRGC in the city of Mahshahr in Khuzestan.

Demonstrators set fire to police stations, banks, some public buildings, a few religious seminaries, and many posters of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They also set up barricades to block roads. In some cities, protesters had been able to take over control of their areas. Some members of the parliament have even resigned in protest.

Tehran University was one of the universities where students held rallies in solidarity with the nationwide protests. In response, security forces closed the gates to facilitate their assault on the students by preventing them from fleeing.

The government has refused to declare the number of deaths. Authorities have returned bodies of those killed to their families, only on the condition that families sign a document stating that “outside agitators,” and not government forces, killed their children. The authorities are also prohibiting publicly announced burials or mourning ceremonies or interviews with the press about loved ones. In some cases, burials have only been allowed in remote areas far from the victim’s home.

Most of the over seven thousand detainees have not been able to communicate with their families since they were arrested. Families have been turned away when they seek information from the authorities. There are reports that detained protesters are being tortured.

Faced with the deep anger of the public, the government has been forced to change its attitude toward those killed. The head of the National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, has just announced that the majority of those killed were innocent and were killed by a “third force” representing the enemies of the Islamic Republic. The authorities are now saying that “some of those arrested” might be innocent.

Various independent labor unions, the union of retirees, labor and women’s rights activists, including political prisoners, have now called for a December 26 nationwide day of honoring those killed by the regime during the latest protests. Mothers of activists killed in prior waves of protests in 2017 and 2009 are also visiting the families of those killed recently.

EWB

Iran faces a severe economic crisis. What is causing the crisis? How much are US policies and the IMF to blame, and how much responsibility lies with the Iranian government?

FA

The economic crisis is caused first and foremost by Iran’s military and political interventions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Iran has also spent billions of dollars on its nuclear and missile programs. On top of this, the latest US sanctions, imposed after the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, have brought the country to the verge of economic collapse.

These sanctions have reduced Iran’s oil sales from 2.5 million barrels a day to 300 to 600,000 barrels a day. Although the sanctions do not include food and medicine, the fact that Iran’s banking system is included means that even basic food items and medicines cannot be purchased, which is breaking the backs of the people.

Iran is an inefficient, militarized, theocratic state-capitalist regime in which over 80 percent of the capital is owned and managed by the IRGC or its contractors. In addition to all the funds spent on militarism, there is no real accountability (even from a capitalist standpoint) for funds acquired through the sale of oil, gas, and petrochemicals. This leads to a great deal of corruption within the government itself. The level of inequality is severe and creates deep anger among the majority of people who do not have enough to eat.

In the face of these developments, the Iranian government has been trying to find new ways to rebuild its economy through alliances with China and Russia. China's One Belt, One Road Initiative seeks to offer Iran a way to circumvent the US sanctions. A recent agreement based on this project provides Iran with a \$400 billion investment in oil, gas, and other infrastructure development and five thousand Chinese security forces in exchange for Iranian oil, gas, and petrochemicals at a 30 percent discount. Both parties have committed to the deal for twenty-five years with a boost in Chinese investments every five years.

EWB

Many protesters have raised opposition to Iran's regional imperialism – its diversion of resources into asserting its power in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. What are Iran's aims in this, and why are Iranians in the uprising opposing it?

FA

Iran's regional imperialism is rooted both in its goal of spreading Shi'a ideology and its desire to develop its "strategic depth" or strategic borders. President Hassan Rouhani has defined these borders as the Mediterranean to the West, the Red Sea to the South, the Caucasus to the North, and the Indian subcontinent to the East.

Iran views Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as the path to the Mediterranean. That access would boost Iran's relationship to global capital and its competition with Saudi Arabia. It would also strengthen its position against Israel, which it challenges through Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran also believes that it can gain financial benefits from reconstruction contracts in Syria and access to Iraq's massive oil reserves.

Up until two years ago, most Iranians were quiet about Iran's military interventions and its nuclear and missile programs. The regime has been using Iranian nationalism to promote these campaigns and programs as a source of honor and strength. Now, however, given the dire economic situation in the country, most Iranians have realized that they are being robbed to pay for wars, arms, and dangerous programs that have brought the country to the point of economic collapse. They are also feeling more sympathy for the people of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, especially in light of the latest popular uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon that have specifically called for an end to Iranian intervention. The majority of Syrians who rose up against the brutal Bashar al-Assad regime in 2011 have long been demanding an end to Iran's military intervention in Syria which began in 2012.

EWB

This is not the first mass protest against the regime. The last major uprising was the Green Movement in 2009. This one seems more radical in its criticisms of the government's internal and regional policies. It also seems to have a different class character, with this one more deeply rooted in the working class and poor. How do you compare the two uprisings?

FA

The 2009 protests emerged in response to the fraudulent presidential election in which the populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the victor. The reformist front-runners, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were declared losers and put under house arrest where they remain to this day.

In 2009, most protesters came from the urban middle class, and most were demanding reforms within the existing system. The working class was present in those protests but did not have a leading role. The December 2017-January 2018 uprising and the latest uprising have been revolts of the working class, especially unemployed youths. In the latest uprising, women played a more active role and were in many cases at the forefront of protests. The 2017 and current protests have also

been nationwide and have included smaller cities and rural areas. In fact, these protests have been strongest in smaller cities.

Both in December 2017 and most recently, protesters have gone beyond the demand for reform and want the overthrow of the regime. These protests have also raised slogans against Iran's military interventions in the region.

The December 2017-January 2018 uprising had been preceded by over a year of protests by workers, students, women, retirees, and the families of political prisoners. That uprising also encouraged a series of actions by women against the compulsory hijab and led to more intense and continuous labor protests and strikes by sugarcane workers, steelworkers, railway workers, teachers, truck drivers, nurses, as well as student protests against the existing educational system, and protests by oppressed minorities, such as the Kurds, ethnic Arabs, and Sufis, against discrimination.

We can say that there has been a process of deepening and diversification of protests since 2009. In fact, this process can be traced back to the protests that started in the late 1990s following a series of government assassinations of dissident leftist intellectuals and brutal attacks on student demonstrators.

The most important element now, however, is the context in which the latest protests have taken place. The 2019 popular uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Chile, and Hong Kong have given Iranians the courage to rise up again. The general strike in France has inspired Iranians who have expressed their solidarity with the French strikers.

EWB

There is a debate on the US left about whether to support the protests in Iran. Some have dismissed the revolt as a US-backed regime-change operation. Others are hesitant to support a revolt against a government that challenges US hegemony. How would you respond to such concerns, and how do you think the US left should approach states that are enemies of the United States?

FA

In order to understand this debate, we can go back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution when the brutal US-backed monarchical regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown by a mass-based movement of workers, student youths, and women. At that time, the Islamic fundamentalist part of the opposition led by Ayatollah Khomeini gained the upper hand by claiming to stand for the oppressed and using the language of opposition to US imperialism.

When several hundred thousand women in Iran came out into the streets on International Women's Day, March 8, 1979, and protested against Khomeini's misogyny, the majority of the Iranian left urged them to stop protesting. They argued that women's protests would damage national unity and weaken the opposition to US imperialism. Caving into the counterrevolutionary agenda of the religious fundamentalists in the name of "anti-imperialism" actually helped Khomeini's faction gain strength. Khomeini and his supporters successfully destroyed the revolution, imprisoned and killed much of the left, and established a state-capitalist theocracy.

Forty years later, the attitude that covers over exploitation, misogyny, and discrimination by authoritarian states in the name of opposition to US imperialism continues to plague a large part of the global left. Even many leftists who acknowledge the authoritarianism of "anti-US imperialist" regimes often silence principled socialist criticism by saying that "this is not the time to criticize" these regimes because at this time we should only focus on opposing US imperialism.

A recent “Letter Against US Imperialism” by leftist intellectuals such as Angela Davis, Vijay Prashad, Robin Kelley, and Hamid Dabashi denounces the latest Iranian mass uprising and continues the old pattern. It attributes the latest protests in Iran to “Iranian native informants and cheerleaders who serve as functionaries of US imperialism.” It argues that the Iranian masses only want “stability” and “reform” but not regime change. The claims in the letter simply do not match the reality on the ground.

Subsequently, strong protest from many Iranian and some global leftists, including a response by Iranian leftist academic scholar, Mina Khanlarzadeh, compelled some signatories to remove their names. The letter has now been removed from the internet.

Fortunately, there are over seventy members of the US and global left who have signed a different letter in solidarity with the mass protests in Iran. More than a hundred socialist feminists from the MENA region and elsewhere have also signed a letter in support of the 2019 uprisings in the MENA region.

Socialists are supposed to stand for human emancipation and a deep connection with the poor and suffering masses of humanity. The protests in Iran may not have explicit socialist slogans, but they do involve the working class, women, the youth, and oppressed minorities who are opposing exploitation, discrimination, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, misogyny, and militarism. This should compel socialists to side with the protests and not with the regime.

The US and the global left have a responsibility to reach out to the Iranian protesters, hold Iran’s brutal regime accountable for its murders, call for the immediate release of the over seven thousand detained protesters, as well as other political prisoners who have been languishing in prisons prior to this uprising. We have a responsibility to uplift the struggles and demands of feminists, labor activists, progressive and democratic intellectuals, and oppressed minority groups such as the Kurds, ethnic Arabs, Bahais, Sufis, and the LGBTQ community.

Iranian activists fear that the government will impose another internet blockage and commit mass executions of political prisoners soon. Activists are warning of a scenario similar to 1988 when several thousand political prisoners were executed in a few days and buried in mass graves under an order by Ayatollah Khomeini.

This appeal for help and support is not just for the sake of the Iranians. It is for the sake of defending similar struggles against capitalist exploitation, racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the United States and elsewhere in the world. We need to connect our struggles internationally in order to move forward.

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRIEDA AFARY

P.S.

• Jacobin, 12.21.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/uprising-iran-protests-fuel-price-us-sanctions>

• ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frieda Afary is a librarian, member of the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists, and producer of Iranian Progressives in Translation. She is also the co-translator of four books on

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