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Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran

Undercutting the Left

The Islamic regime managed to undercut the Left in many more ways than through its populist radical economic and social practices. One was the resort to anti-imperialist political actions such as the seizure of the American Embassy in November 1979, which met with the approval of Ayatollah Khomeini and was widely popular among Iranians in general. Another was sheer intimidation and brutality, which began fairly early on. Self-styled *partisans of God* (hezbollahi) regularly harassed leftists, and in August 1979 eleven Fedaii were executed in Kurdestan by Revolutionary Guards. Early in 1980, in the northwestern region of Turkaman Sahra bordering the Caspian Sea, the regime ruthlessly put down a cultural political movement of the ethnically Turkic population who were supportive of the Fedaii and had received assistance from them in the organization of numerous peasant cooperatives. Four Fedaii leaders *all Turkamans* were kidnapped and murdered. In April the *liberal* President Bani-Sadr endorsed the initiation of the *Islamic cultural revolution* an invidious twist of the Maoist formulation. [31] This led to confrontations with university councils and especially with radical students affiliated to various Left groups. For the next two years, all the universities and some high schools were shut down while the curriculum was duly islamicized and left-wing faculties purged.

These developments took their toll on the Left movement. In June the Fedaii organization split over the nature of the regime into a Minority and a Majority, the latter also containing the so-called Left-Wing (Jenahe Chap). This was followed by the split and eventual dissolution of the large women’s organization affiliated to the Fedaii, and the gradual disintegration of the workers’ Councils movement. In September, Iraqi troops invaded the southern province of Khuzestan, wrecking devastation on the area. Eventually it became clear that Saddam Hussein, who thought that the regime would collapse immediately, had made a monumental mistake. For the invasion raised patriotic fervour and millions of Iranians, including those who had become disaffected, now rallied around the regime in defence of the homeland. Again, the Left was faced with the problem of how to respond to yet another pressing development. Peykar advocated a Bolshevik-style policy of *turning the guns around* on the regime. The Tudeh, Fedaii Majority, Mojahedin, Trotskyists and Ranjabaran who still supported the regime as essentially progressive, on account of its anti-imperialism condemned the Iraqis and supported the defence of Iran. The Fedaii Minority did the same, but also characterized the war as one between two reactionary regimes in which the people of both societies bore the costs. Like the other Left organizations, the Fedaii’ Minority sent volunteers to the south at the beginning of the war, and many died.

The war proved to be a boon to the Islamicists in another important way, for it allowed the dominant Islamic Republican Party (IRP) to eliminate its Liberal rival-collaborators (Bani-Sadr and his associates) and the Left. The spring of 1981 was particularly tense, and events were unfolding with such rapidity as constantly to overtake the Left. The following passage poignantly addresses the Fedaii’s dilemma: “Owing to the rapidity of daily events, we do not have sufficient time for periods of rigorous theoretical work and all-round ideological struggle to come up with thorough answers to each and every question. Today, while a pile of undone tasks weighs on our shoulders and new events face us every day, we are forced to find, in a short time, concrete, clear and explicit answers. Postponing these tasks for a long period of theoretical work and ideological struggle is equivalent to inaction, to falling behind the mass movement and to metamorphosis into an appendage of pettybourgeois crusaders.”
The Fedaii’s initial theoretical weakness was thus compounded by the compelling demands of the moment. Moreover, the petty-bourgeois crusaders, the Mojahedin, were behaving like cavaliers seuls and complicating the problem facing the Left as a whole. As tensions rose between the irp and Bani-Sadr, the Mojahedin decided to cast their lot in with the President which was galling to those leftists who recalled his role in the Islamic cultural revolution. The secular Left and the Mojahedin began to move apart, as the latter were exhibiting commandist tendencies and a noticeable lack of interest in unity with the secular Left. Their alliance with Bani-Sadr and the formation of the National Resistance Council (nrc) reflected this. For the Left first learned about these developments through leaflets and newspapers, and the door was merely left ?half-open? if they wished to join a government for the reconstruction of the Islamic Republic. As the OCU paper Raha i predicted: No doubt some will still enter and only then realize that they must sit on the floor, by the door, as second-class citizens their presence merely contributing to the legitimacy of the assembly and nothing more.? Those who did join well-known left intellectuals and the Kurdish Democratic Party? eventually distanced themselves from the nrc when it became clear that the Mojahedin were the virtual masters and Massoud Rajavi the authoritarian leader. By 1985 even Bani-Sadr had left the NRC, following Rajavi’s meeting in Paris with the Iraqi foreign minister. After all, whatever one thought of the Khomeini regime, it did not justify fraternization with those responsible for invading Iran, deploying chemical weapons, and bombing civilian sites.

Meanwhile, of course, in June 1981 the Islamic regime arrested leftists (including the much-loved Fedaii poet and playwright Saeed Soltanpour), denounced the Mojahedin as traitors and called for the impeachment of Bani-Sadr. Mojahedin cadres demonstrated in the streets?and the regime cracked down hard. When the Mojahedin planted a bomb in irp headquarters that took a hundred or so lives, including those of the entire leadership, the regime declared war. Soltanpour was executed, numerous Mojahedin were arrested, and Bani-Sadr and Massoud Rajavi fled to Paris. What followed was a two-year reign of terror characterized by Mojahedin bombings and regime reprisals. Scores of Mojahedin activists and sympathizers were rounded up and sent to prison, where many underwent torture and execution. Communist groups such as the Fedaii, Rah-e Kargar and ocu variously described the Mojahedin activities as putschist or Blanquist, whose effect was to provoke the regime into a battle that the opposition clearly could not win. Nonetheless, they felt that the solidaristic thing to do was to join the mini-civil war underway. In the process, numerous leftists lost their lives, their livelihoods, or their morale. Others fled Iran to escape the terror. Defeated and fragmented, many of the Left organizations underwent further splits, or dissolved. Ranjbaran (the pro-regime Maoists) and Peykar (the anti-regime Maoists) are no more; the Trotskyist organizations (which supported the regime as anti-imperialist for a long time) also disappeared; a faction within the Minority calling itself the Tendency for Socialist Revolution broke off and tried to form journal collectives in Europe and the United States, but eventually dissipated amid acrimony; the Fedaii’Minority split once again in 1986; the OCU is reduced to study groups although it does now produce intelligent analyses of developments in Iran.

The Tudeh Fiasco

And what of the Tudeh Party and Fedaii?Majority? From the beginning the Tudeh had tried to entrench itself within the new political elite, propagating the theory of the non-capitalist path of development and the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the national democratic revolution. Almost single-handedly, the Tudeh Party was responsible for the spread of the notions of a progressive clergy and revolutionary Islam; the prophets were dutifully invoked and sprinkled throughout Tudeh documents. The Party?'s main theoretician, the well-known writer Ehsan Tabari, wrote extensively on the subject and probably authored a widely circulated booklet The Progressive Clergy and Us. A brief quotation will suffice to give an idea of its argument: The programme of
social development posed by scientific socialism has some affinities with social demands and principles of Islam and Shiism... and this fact makes cooperation between supporters of socialism and the progressive clergy and its supporters not only possible but imperative. World Marxist Review carried an article by Tabari in 1982 (after the repression of the militant Left had been launched!) entitled The Role of Religion in Our Revolution. Here he claims that Islam is the ideology of the anti-imperialist revolution and sings the praises of Imam Khomeini while attacking liberals such as Bazargan and National Front members. He refers to anti-communism and fascist-type groups in Islamic guise (hezbollahi) but does not link these to the Islamic state. He further draws a distinction between revolutionary Islam and traditional Islam, and dissociates the Party from extreme leftist groupings who are opposed to Islam and the Islamic Republic; unlike them, our Party supports the Revolution. It must be said that, whatever its mistakes, the militant Left did at least make a political distinction between the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic regime; whereas the Tudeh Party proceeded to enact a new version of la trahison des clercs.

On at least one occasion Ehsan Tabari engaged the progressive clergy in a televised philosophical debate. Here he noted that the Islamic preoccupation with the problem of free will and determination was similar to the Marxist concern with social/human agency and lawfulness. He also sought to defend historical and dialectical materialism by finding parallels in Islamic philosophical and political thought. [32] However, while Tudeh literature advocated a Marxist-Muslim dialogue and waxed eloquent on the virtues of Islam and the Shiite clergy, the Islamic ideologues themselves never wavered in their denunciation of materialism, secularism, Marxism and communism.

In another article published in World Marxist Review in 1983, the Tudeh secretary of the time, Kianuri, motivated the Party’s political stance by referring to the sustained struggle proceeding on four main fronts:
(1) against external plots, the political, economic and military pressure of world imperialism headed by the usa, and regional reaction;
(2) against the intrigues of domestic counter-revolutionaries, who wanted to stage a coup, and against political terrorism;
(3) against the ?economic terrorism? of the big capitalists and landowners and for social justice;
and (4) for guaranteed civil rights and freedoms.
The priorities are interesting, as is the deflection of criticism away from the regime to external contradictions and the role of us imperialism. Elsewhere in the article Washington is branded as the main initiator of the Iranian-Iraqi war. Kianuri also denounces the conspiracy and plot that Bani-Sadr had supposedly attempted, and lambasts the divisive activity of leftists, Maoist-type extremists and their like. No reference is made to the numerous communists, socialists and other dissidents who were then being persecuted, jailed, tortured or killed by the regime. The only complaint concerns harassment of the Tudeh Party itself, and of its associate, the Fedaii Majority.

Mindful of the 1983 crackdown on the Party and the arrest of its entire leadership, one can only shake one’s head in bewilderment that such an experienced and established party could have been so wrong. Truly these were the graduated lackies of clericalism that Lenin had criticized?whatever sympathy one might have for Tudeh members in prison. As for the charge that the Party was simply following the line and analysis of its comrades to the north, Shahroug Akhavi’s study of Russianlanguage writings on the Iranian Revolution, the clergy and the Islamic Republic conclusively shows that Soviet perspectives were more varied, more sophisticated, and more critical of the mullahs and theocracy than the Tudeh theoreticians ever were. [33] Only now does the Party?what remains of it?and its new leadership concede that it was at best naive and at worst misled by leaders such as Kianuri. Let us hope that the lessons will be learnt by other Communist parties, especially in the Middle East and parts of Africa, which have displayed a
tendency to compromise democratic and socialist principles and to subordinate themselves to nationalist and anti-imperialist movements and regimes. [34]