

Solidarity and Student Protests in Iran

By Jeremy Brecher | July 2003

This June, vigilante forces attacked nonviolent Iranian student protesters, charging them on motorcycles and assaulting them with batons, chains, and knives. Instead of protecting the students against the vigilante attacks, the Iranian government threatened to punish the students severely and arrested over 4,000 people.¹ A new round of protests scheduled for early July was thwarted by a ban on meetings, the closing of university dorms, and the kidnapping of three student leaders. Continuing repression of the student movement, combined with deep popular unrest, is likely to keep the Iranian conflict in the world spotlight.

Normally, the global peace movement and political left would respond to repression by an authoritarian, theocratic regime with outrage and protest. But so far there has been a deafening silence.² The reason is probably not that peace activists don't care about democracy and human rights when they are trampled by opponents of America.³ More likely there is wariness about intervening in a complex, multiplayer drama in which the left could have an impact contrary to what it intends. The purpose of this essay is to promote the discussion needed to help the movement see its way clear to a more forthright, but responsible, response. Such a discussion may also help clarify other situations in which the peace movement and the left must respond to authoritarian regimes opposed to U.S. imperialism.

Iran has long had a strong and recurring internal conflict between autocratic and democratic tendencies. Its first constitutional movement forced the shah (monarch) to accept an elected parliament nearly a century ago, and powerful democratic movements have periodically arisen since that time.

In 1953, the National Front movement, based in the urban middle class and led by Mohammad Mossadegh, aspired to nationalize the British-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Newly elected U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower authorized the CIA to cooperate with a British plan to overthrow the Mossadegh government. The coup was successful, and the shah was established as a virtual dictator.⁴ He froze out the democratic nationalist elements that had backed Mossadegh and, with strong backing from the U.S., ruled by tyranny, terror, and torture. The U.S. soon succeeded in taking Iran's oil industry from the British. U.S. policy designated Iran along with Israel as Washington's "surrogates" for control of the Middle East.

A recently disclosed aspect of the CIA operation is that it included unprecedented political mobilization of the traditionalist, fundamentalist Shiite religious leaders known

as the mullahs.⁵ As Gabriel Kolko put it, the U.S. "eliminated a secular, middle-class nationalism." As throughout the Middle East, rebellion and discontent increasingly took on fundamentalist Islamic forms and ideologies.⁶

Resistance to the shah grew as the regime became more and more repressive. In 1978 massive street demonstrations led to bloody confrontations with the shah's police, and the shah's peasant-based army soon disintegrated. The revolutionary movement had many tendencies, but the religious leaders who had first been politicized by the CIA ultimately won out. In 1979 the shah fled into exile, and Iran was declared an Islamic republic. Though elections and some other democratic forms remained, the mullahs possessed ultimate power and used mass executions, long incarcerations, and vigilante violence to impose their will.

A New Generation

Over the course of the 1990s, a new Iranian generation came of age that increasingly despised the repressiveness and corruption of the theocratic regime and the poverty and isolation to which it was consigning the country. A reformist movement elected Mohammad Khatami as president. According to Human Rights Watch, today

Iran is caught in a continuing power struggle between elected reformers, who control both the presidency and parliament, and clerical conservatives, who exercise authority through various offices, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the judiciary and the Council of Guardians, and elements of the security forces.⁷

Many students and other Iranians have lost faith in the nonconfrontational strategy of the elected reformers. A quiet but carefully conducted poll in 2002 showed broad opposition to the regime's policies.⁸



The current protests, the latest in a series, began with student opposition to a plan to charge tuition at state-run universities. The protests spread to a dozen cities, the demands deepened to include full democratization, and support included many adult onlookers, who honked car horns in approval of the student demonstrators.⁹ The movement is self-organized and nonviolent and has wide public support.¹⁰

The student movement's principal demand is to eliminate the power of the self-perpetuating theocratic elite over the Iranian government and to allow the elected government to rule without the "guidance" of the mullahs and their allies. One widely discussed method to accomplish this proposes a referendum giving full authority to the elected government.

A Complex Picture

This situation appears to be a straightforward confrontation of idealistic young democrats and repressive fundamentalist authoritarians. But it is embedded in a context of geopolitical manipulation that complicates the picture.

Over the last quarter century, every U.S. administration has implacably opposed the Islamic Republic in Iran.¹¹ During the Iran-Iraq war, Washington even supported Saddam Hussein as a bulwark against Iran. This is hardly because the U.S. has sought a democratic Iran—it supported both the mullahs and the shah at one time or another. Rather, it sees Iran as a critical source of oil and a powerful country that currently threatens—but could support—both U.S. and Israeli interests.

Germany, France, Britain, and Russia have taken advantage of U.S. isolation from Iran to develop ties with the regime and to profit from its oil wealth. According to the *New York Times*, France, for example, is "committed to the stability of the Islamic Republic."¹² Opportunistic European support for the current Iranian regime has actually led many of its opponents to consider the U.S. as their only potential savior.

As part of its post-9/11 bluster, the Bush administration declared Iran part of the "axis of evil" and has made numerous threats against it. In order to amplify those threats, the White House has seized on recent indications that Iran is continuing its quest for nuclear weapons, which was initiated by the shah.¹³ Washington has pressured the European Union, Russia, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to encourage Iran to accept tighter monitoring of its nuclear programs.

Currently the Bush administration is divided on its Iran policy. Mainstream conservatives in the State Department

have been inclined to support the official reform movement, whereas neoconservatives in the Defense Department see an opportunity to promote a pro-U.S. revolution in Iran.

The Bush administration has repeatedly hinted that it might pursue an Iraq-style attack and occupation. National Security adviser Condoleezza Rice, echoing threats that preceded the U.S. attack on Iraq, recently spoke of a "Made in America" solution if multilateral action does not produce results. "Sometimes one has to fight wars to deal with tyrants," she warned.¹⁴ Notwithstanding such implicit threats, the problems of managing the aftermath of a U.S. attack on Iran appear to be an awesome deterrent.

President Bush recently praised the student protests as "the beginning of people expressing themselves toward a free Iran."¹⁵ This comes as U.S. troops regularly censor the media and shoot down demonstrators next door in Iraq. Although the Bush administration may wish to use student protest to destabilize the situation in Iran, Washington is notorious for promoting revolts that it is not then willing to buttress—witness the U.S.-encouraged uprisings by Kurds and Shiites in Iraq after the Gulf War that Saddam Hussein was allowed to suppress with extreme brutality. So the White House is unlikely to have scruples about cheering on the Iranian students to destruction. Encouraging the student revolt is done in the interest of Washington's agenda, which can not be accurately described as seeking freedom, independence, and self-determination for the people of Iran.

The actual impact of Bush administration destabilization efforts is difficult to evaluate. Bush's endorsement of the student movement may already have helped hard-liners legitimate their suppression of the students as necessary to guard against "foreign forces."¹⁶ On the other hand, fear of foreign intervention may also serve as a constraint. For example, after the start of the student demonstrations, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on state television, "I call on the pious and the [conservative cadres] not to intervene whenever they see riots." Two days later, a right-wing militia pledged not to take part in the street skirmishes.¹⁷

Such restraint may lead some supporters of democratization to see U.S. threats as a way to accelerate reform. But that presumes that democratization really matters to the Bush administration. In fact, the mullahs are less likely to respond to U.S. threats by conceding democracy and human rights to their citizens than by offering concessions suited to the real Bush agenda—such as oil deals and a cooperative stance regarding Iraq.

Dilemmas for the Peace Movement

For the global peace movement and the left, this situation presents several interlocking dilemmas. How is it possible to promote human rights and democracy in Iran without strengthening Washington's drive to dominate the world in general and the Middle East in particular? How is it possible to oppose European support for the Islamic Republic without undermining the development of a much-needed united front for the containment of U.S. aggression? How is it possible to encourage disarmament and restrict the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction while discouraging U.S. threats against Iran and other countries?

The problem is in some ways parallel to that faced by the international peace movement in the 1980s, when repression of nonviolent antiauthoritarian revolts in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe coincided with aggressive U.S. military expansionism. At that time, the European Nuclear Disarmament movement developed a sophisticated strategy that simultaneously increased pressure for human rights in the East and demilitarization in the West. Today we need to build democratic alternatives to the tyranny of the mullahs, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the devastation that the U.S. has wreaked on Afghanistan and Iraq and now threatens to visit on Iran.

The goal for the global antiwar movement and the left should be a nonviolent transition to democracy in Iran complete with human rights and freedom from domination by outside powers. The movement should aim to empower the Iranian people against the mullahs, the U.S., the EU, or anyone else who would treat them as pawns for self-serving agendas.

Next Steps

The first step toward this goal is to demand that the Iranian regime release all political prisoners, regardless of their beliefs, and end the suppression of protesters' human rights by its own agencies and those of vigilante groups. There is also a clear need to support the peaceful struggle of the Iranian people for democracy, including a referendum to decide their own future. An important aspect here is the demand that European countries and the EU end both tacit and active support for the suppression of human rights and democracy by the Iranian regime.

International support for human rights played a major role in the democratization in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. History indicates that outside support for responsible government can have a substantial

impact in Iran as well. In 1996, a German court implicated Islamic Republic leaders of assassinating their opponents in Berlin. Several European countries then briefly cut diplomatic ties with the regime. The ruling had a huge impact on Iranian opinion, contributing substantially to the reformist President Khatami's landslide victory.

Support can take the form of action as well as words. In Poland, labor and left activists bolstered the Solidarity movement by smuggling in printing presses, fax machines, photocopiers, and other means for mobilizing the public. Satellite broadcasts are already playing a significant support role for the Iranian movement. More direct contact, ranging from solidarity delegations to the kind of volunteer human rights observation and nonviolent intervention provided by the "Internationals" in Palestine, would be difficult but appropriate. So would a campaign for international human rights monitors.¹⁸

Such an approach is almost the opposite of a U.S. "liberation" that seeks to impose "democracy" and "human rights" through war and occupation, along the model of Afghanistan and Iraq. The international peace movement should demand human rights and democratization in Iran alongside its demands for an end to the U.S. occupation in Iraq and the Israeli occupation in Palestine.

The left must also lay out an approach to the problem of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that provides an alternative to the selective Bush administration policy of threatening to unilaterally "Saddamize" WMD-aspiring states. A good starting point is to demand that all countries support the Syrian-sponsored UN proposal to make the Middle East a WMD-free zone. This would require the U.S. and other powers to address the issue of Israeli nuclear weapons as part of discussions about eliminating weapons of mass destruction. And in order for any response to proliferation to be effective, the existing nuclear powers would need to meet their responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by moving promptly toward the elimination of their own nuclear weapons. In such a context, specific demands that Iran not build nuclear weapons and that it comply with IAEA demands for answers to questions about its nuclear program are appropriate. But such demands need to be combined with negotiations to provide Iran with other means of security against military attack.

Iran is only one of many countries that appear to oppose the Bush administration's imperial juggernaut but that also suppress the human rights of their own people. It is always a temptation for the peace movement and the left to soft-pedal our critique of such regimes out of a feeling that

“the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” It is particularly hard to find a balanced position when Washington is utilizing the flaws of those regimes it opposes to justify aggression against them while ignoring the equal or greater crimes of regimes it supports.

Failure to defend human rights in such circumstances only plays into the hands of the Bush juggernaut, however. Perhaps the most effective Bush administration justification for its aggression, especially with the media-manipulated American people, is its claim that the U.S. overthrow of regimes like those in Afghanistan and Iraq frees people from tyranny and establishes human rights and democracy. Any movement to terminate the Bush juggernaut shoots itself in the heart when it fails to identify a better way for people to liberate themselves from oppression. We can't afford to provide any justification for the charge that we are the defenders of tyrants. Let us instead be known as people whose fundamental solidarity is not with one or another government but with all people who are struggling for liberation from oppression.

Jeremy Brecher <jbrecher@igc.org> is a historian and the author of 12 books, including Strike! and Globalization from Below, and is a regular contributor to Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org).

Endnotes

- ¹ “Iran: End Vigilante Attacks,” *Human Rights News*, June 20, 2003, available at <http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/06/iran062003.htm>. See also press communiqué of the International Committee for Transition to Democracy in Iran (CITDI), June 23, 2003. citdi@yahoo.fr.
 - ² An exception is a critical statement by the International Committee for Transition to Democracy in Iran signed by Samir Amin, Noam Chomsky, Harold Pinter, and Edward Said, among others, cited above.
 - ³ Although it is alleged that “much of the antiwar left has sadly long since stopped caring about the actual freedom of people under oppressive regimes, except, of course, if their plight is a way to blame or excoriate
- the United States.” Andrew Sullivan, “Shocking Silence,” *Salon*, June 19, 2003.
 - ⁴ Gabriel Kolko, *Another Century of War?* (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 23-4. According to *The New York Times*, today young Iranians “express nostalgia for the man ousted in that coup, the nationalistic Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh.” Elaine Sciolino, “Nuclear Ambitions Aren’t New for Iran,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2003.
 - ⁵ This effort went to bizarre extremes. “Iranians working for the C.I.A. and posing as Communists harassed religious leaders and staged the bombing of one cleric’s home in a campaign to turn the country’s Islamic religious community against Mossadegh’s government.” James Risen, “Secrets of History: The C.I.A. in Iran,” *The New York Times on the Web*, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html>. See also “The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953,” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* No. 28, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB28/>
 - ⁶ Kolko, op.cit., p. 25.
 - ⁷ “Iran: U.K. Government Should Press for Real Reform,” *Human Rights News*, February 4, 2003, available at <http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/02/iran020403.htm>.
 - ⁸ “Poll on U.S. Ties Rocks Iran,” BBC News, October 2, 2003.
 - ⁹ Sciolino, op.cit.
 - ¹⁰ The movement has received support from satellite broadcasts by Iranian exiles in the U.S., some of them advocates of restoring the shah.
 - ¹¹ A partial exception was tacit cooperation against the Taliban during the U.S. attack on Afghanistan.
 - ¹² Sciolino, op.cit. Recent French repression of opponents of the Islamic Republic who were apparently flirting with U.S. officials can be interpreted as a statement of France’s continuing determination to support the Iranian regime in the face of U.S. threats.
 - ¹³ Ibid.
 - ¹⁴ Anton La Guardia, “Rice Warns of ‘Made in America’ Solution to Iran’s Nuclear Plans,” *The Daily Telegraph*, June 27, 2003.
 - ¹⁵ Sciolino, op.cit.
 - ¹⁶ “In the immediate terms, President Bush’s vocal support for student demonstrations has administered them the kiss of death.” Nihal Singh, “Mideast Preoccupation Dooms U.S. Strategy to Destabilize Iran,” *Khaleej Times*, June 24, 2003.
 - ¹⁷ Ardeshir Moaveni, “Recent clashes open new fault lines in Iran,” *Eurasia Insight*, July 2, 2003, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav070103a.shtml>.
 - ¹⁸ Iran is a signatory to the International Declaration of Human Rights. However, the UN recently cancelled the position of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to Iran.

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Recommended citation:

Jeremy Brecher, “Solidarity and Student Protests in Iran,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/iran2003.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Jeremy Brecher

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

