

Iran Repression Just Changes Its Uniform

Under Khomaini, Political Prisoners Again Fill Jails, and Rights Are Crushed

BY FARHAD NOURI

Last February's overthrow of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, was an event that was welcomed by millions of Iranians. The toppling of his hated regime released powerful expectations of democracy and justice. But today many of those who helped rid the country of the dictator are worried about the course of events under the leadership of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

During his 25-year reign, the shah destroyed the ability of ordinary Iranians to organize politically by repressing all political organizations, except his own rubber-stamp party. Consequently, the anti-shah movement fell into the hands of the country's only organized leadership—the religious hierarchy in the mosques.

Khomeini, the best known of the religious leaders, appealed to the people to demonstrate in the streets by the millions. He appealed to the shah's soldiers to break the discipline of the army and to join the protesters. And he refused to make any compromises.

As a result, Khomeini enjoyed immense popularity. More than 5 million people came into the streets to greet him on his return from exile. But, once in office, Khomeini began attempting to stabilize Iran by preserving the capitalist structure, a move to the right that conflicted with the workers' concept of revolutionary change.

Most Iranians hoped that the shah's departure would open up the possibility of winning political rights, making economic and social gains, and overcoming the tremendous poverty and backwardness inherited from the Pahlavi regime. Among Iran's most pressing needs were, and still are:

—Industrialization, free from domination by foreign corporations.

—Land reform for the peasants, who comprise two-thirds of the total population.

—Democratic rights for the national groups within Iran who comprise 60% of the population.

—Jobs for the millions of unemployed.

—Higher wages to meet soaring inflation.

—Equality for women.

Khomeini has so far refused to take measures that could meet these goals. Indeed, he has resorted increasingly to repressive measures, trying to prevent the emergence of genuine democracy.

Khomeini's men have begun to take over the workers' councils that were formed during the insurrection against the shah. Neighborhood committees and peasant councils have been taken over by government appointees.

Soldiers who played a heroic role in resisting the shah's orders have been denied political rights. Censorship has again been imposed on radio, television and the press, and more than 40 newspapers and magazines have been banned outright. Opposition political parties have been forced underground.

Nevertheless, in countless ways the Iranian people are still reasserting their hopes for a democratic and just society. Within the military, sentiment against the war in Kurdistan continues to grow, with more and more soldiers unwilling to fight against their fellow citizens.

Once again the government's repressive measures have filled the jails with political prisoners. One of the best-known cases is that of the 14 members of the Socialist Workers Party who were arrested four months ago for their activism.

On Aug. 26, in secret trials, 12 of them were

sentenced to be executed. The remaining two are women, and they were sentenced to life imprisonment. However, because of an international outcry, the execution orders have not been carried out.

Their "offense" was advocating a democratically elected constituent assembly to discuss the problems of the country, urging support of the rights of the Arabs, Kurds and other national groups in Iran, proclaiming the right of workers to organize, and seeking other democratic rights.

Several of the prisoners lived in Iran throughout the shah's reign, which they opposed at great personal sacrifice. Others, forced into exile, attended school in the United States. Many were active in the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran.

Their plight and the response of prominent people from throughout the world have been featured in newspapers in Iran, despite the rigid censorship.

The case has become a rallying point for all those in Iran who are looking for a way to challenge the repressive measures taken by the government.

More protests are needed to save these 14 dissenters. Perhaps then the way will be opened for the release of others jailed for their political views, for newspapers to be published, for political parties to function again; and for the struggle for democracy and freedom to go forward. The voices of defenders of democratic and human rights must be heard in Qum and Tehran, and by Iran's representatives elsewhere.

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