

IRAN: THE REALITY IS MUCH MORE COMPLEX

THE STRUGGLE WORLDWIDE

In coverage of Iran in the West—including Left coverage—the emphasis is placed on the reactionary aspects of the revolution. But there is another side, a side that immediately strikes a visitor to the country. This involves both a remarkable level of politicisation amongst ordinary people and a world of new possibilities for the left.

Countless demonstrations, pickets, and other forms of street protest; slogans on every wall, door, bank, hotel and monument; a plethora of newspapers, leaflets and posters; political meetings in even the smallest towns and villages; regular elections...

These forms of mass political expression are part of day-to-day life in Iran today. They are the clearest sign that a revolution has taken place. They act as a barometer of popular support for the Government. And, at the same time, they provide considerable grounds for optimism that the revolution will continue. The revolution may have given birth to a weird and whimsical creature (the new regime), but it had other babies too, and they are a lot healthier than their original frailty suggested.

DILEMMA

So the days are past when political activity was stifled in the extreme, and gone is most of the apparatus that achieved this. With the revolution people have, on a massive scale, seen popular protest work. It's a lesson that no-one can easily forget, and it's a lesson that works, both for the regime (when hundreds of thousands of people respond to Government calls for street protest) and against it (when any kind of displeasure or hardship can spark a protest).

The new regime's dilemma was apparent from the outset. In response to one of Khomeini's first pronouncements—regarding the chador, or body-length veil—thousands of women came out on the streets to insist on the right to choose what they should wear. A concession was won.

Initially, such anti-Government protests were the exception, but with two massive Left-wing organisations, and several smaller ones, emerging out of the revolution; with unemployment at 20-30% and inflation higher; and with all the social conditions of the Shah's regime continuing if not worsening, protests were bound to grow.

ARBITRARY

The regime has taken most of the mass protests in its stride to-date, partly by treating the Left with a relatively arbitrary mixture of co-option, demagoguery, manipulation and repression; partly through its own ability to bring out hundreds of thousands of supporters at the drop of a hat; and partly because it has made concessions in face of the most threatening pressures. All of which poses a number of dilemmas for the Left:

- the Left organisations have freedoms and opportunities undreamt of under the Shah. At the same time, the potential for a renewed wave of repression is very real.

- there is a plethora of radical newspapers, which are widely available despite the official ban imposed on most of them. But newspaper sellers, public meetings and demonstrations are often subject to attack by the more militant supporters of the regime.

- members of Left organisations, even semi-legal ones, can stand for election to Parliament. But elections are rigged with impunity, to prevent a meaningful Left presence in Parliament. Thus the most recent elections produced only 4-Left 'MPs', when 5 were expected in Tehran alone.

- leading members of the Left have had the opportunity to debate on TV with Bani-Sadr, the President, and thus present their views directly to millions of people. But, for the most part, TV and radio act as a propaganda machine for the Government.



LEFT ATTACKED

A recent example of the latter came a day after the Iranian New Year, in mid-March. With early election results indicating a substantial vote for anti-Government forces, especially the large 'Islamic Marxist' Mujahadeen organisation, Khomeini devoted a long speech to attacking the Left—especially those who tried to 'combine Islam with foreign ideologies'!

Meanwhile the Left continues to grow, especially in more secular areas like Tehran (its South excluded) and

the provinces around the Caspian Sea. I heard it suggested that the weekly paper of the Mujahadeen has a distribution of up to one million copies, and that the other large organisation, the Fedayeen (independent Marxist-Leninist) has a million or more sympathisers around the country—and this with an adult population of 16-18 million. Slight exaggeration perhaps, but certainly there are areas where they have a bookstall or bookshop in even the smallest villages, and they have both demonstrated their ability to attract huge numbers to meetings.

STEREOTYPES

The stereotyped views of Iran in the West do not match the more complex reality. While there is much brutal truth in the general picture of reaction and repression, there is much more besides. Women's oppression is the most obvious and most deeply embedded, but socialist women are beginning to get organised and already have one or two minor successes to their credit. Kurdish nationalists remain strong and are increasingly coming under the influence of the Left—many people say that it is the Kurds who have opened up all the Left's opportunities, and that their growing strength is a positive sign for all progressive forces.

And considerable optimism surrounds the revival of workers' councils, or shura, which seem to be recovering from a period when Islamic forces held sway. These shura, along with the women's organisations, are two of the key areas in which progress has to be achieved if the revolution is to be taken further.

Bolivian Death Squad Strikes

It looks as though Argentine methods of right wing terror have begun to spread to the neighbouring country of Bolivia. At the end of March the body of a respected Jesuit journalist and film critic Luis Espinal, was found on the road to La Paz airport. He had been kidnapped by extreme right wing forces on Saturday evening, tortured and shot.

At once the central Bolivian labour federation (COB) strongly condemned the act as that of 'fascism trying to produce an atmosphere of chaos which will justify calling for a military takeover'. The Church demanded an immediate investigation into the murder and the president, Lydia Gueiler called for a full police enquiry. The journalists' union called a 24-hour stoppage on Tuesday.

ATMOSPHERE

Army high command and the right are claiming that the left killed Espinal to discredit the armed forces. On the other hand recently retired interior minister, Jorge Selum Vaca Diez claims that a terrorist group is being organised to support the next coup.

The atmosphere of terror remains. Several Bolivian journalists have expressed fear for their lives. The following week after Espinal's murder,

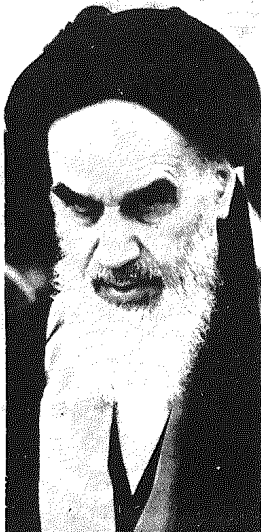
bombs exploded in two local radio stations.

AQUI

Luis Espinal was founder and editor of the left wing weekly, *Aqui*. His paper had in February revealed the existence of a secret document from the army's intelligence service listing journalists and media workers classified as 'enemies of the armed

forces' and 'left extremists' and naming *Aqui* and its staff. His death marks a sudden escalation in the struggle for a free press in Bolivia and a sinister new departure in the activities of the extreme right in a country where acts of terror of this kind have been rare.

FURTHER INFORMATION FROM THE BOLIVIAN COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, c/o 1 Cambridge Terrace, LONDON NW1.



By Ben Johnson