

On the 30th Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution

30 years on, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which was one of the most important revolutions of the 20th century continues to have a profound effect both inside Iran and the entire Middle East. Although it was a direct reaction to the last Shah's White Revolution of the early 60s, it had also deep historical roots that went as far back as the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Of course, the second revolution took place under very different historical conditions and brought to the forefront an entirely different alignment of social forces and historical tasks, but it was also marked at birth with all the unresolved problems of the first. After the first revolution, Iran's rulers turned to the Russian Cossack Army to enslave the newly established parliament thus ensuring all the major historical tasks facing Iranian society as it entered the 20th century to remain unresolved. Iranian society as a whole remained backward right up to the second revolution and continued to suffer under an absolutist system of rule already overthrown almost a century earlier.

At the time of the second revolution, however, Iran was a country in which capitalism ruled – not only by the fact that capitalism had become the dominant mode of production, but, more crucially, in the sense that the class character of the state had been qualitatively transformed. Whatever Iran was before the Constitutional Revolution, by the second revolution it had a capitalist economy and a bourgeois state. The crucial factor in Iranian modern history was thus this very transformation which following the suppression of revolutionary change from below was carried out by brutal force of the state and from above. But if the combined might of the Iranian ruling classes faced a revolutionary challenge as early as 1906, how could they then gather up the forces necessary to continue to rule and direct this century of transformation from above? The answer is, of course: “not on their own”! The other glaring fact of Iranian history is that this entire period of transformation from above overlaps with the history of outside intervention in Iran (joint Russian and British imperialism up to 1917, British 1917-1953, American 1953-1979).

The direct outcome of this intervention was the contradictory situation in which Iran found itself during the second revolution. Capitalism ruled in 1979, but with a political regime closer to Asiatic despotism than bourgeois parliamentarism. This was not just a simple remnant of the Asiatic past but a new Frankenstein concocted with bits out of Iran's dustbin of history and given a new lease of life by imperialist domination of Iran. Furthermore, Shah's despotism was not simply an anomaly in an otherwise bubbling modern capitalist economy, in fact the type of capitalist transformation from above would have been impossible without this monster at its helm. The former was the pre-condition for the latter. The battle cry of constitutionalist in a period in which there was hardly any capitalist class of significance in Iran was "freedom, constitutional law and security for all citizens". In the capitalist Iran of 1979 the Shah still ruled outside the law and no citizen including even members of the ruling classes enjoyed any freedom or security. Like the *mogul* kings before him who would donate whole provinces to their faithful servants, the Shah's regime was selling capitalist monopoly rights to a group of cronies around the Royal Court, whilst the international monopolies who were the actual sellers were hailing it as the Shah's White Revolution. What kept the Shah's regime in power was therefore not the strength of capitalist relations inside Iran but Iran's place within the world capitalist order which gave it its apparatus of police rule.

Before the second revolution could even get off the ground it was thus forced to wear the death mask of the first. This in itself was nothing new. Similarly most revolutions in other backward countries were always burdened with the dead weight of all the previous defeated ones. In Iran, however, history had a new twist. At the outbreak of the revolutionary crisis in 1976-77, progressive revolutionary forces faced not only the Shah's "Westernised" and USA-approved capitalist ruling class, albeit more Asiatic than Western, but also Iran's very own and very "traditional" pre-capitalist ruling classes, the powerful merchants of the Iranian bazaar alongside their twin partners in centuries of crime, the even more powerful Shiite hierarchy. Both layers having been part of the ruling classes right up to the White Revolution had since "joined" the opposition to the rule of the Shah.

One should not confuse these layers with the so-called national-bourgeoisie which itself has proven to be one of the most confusing categories of the 20th century. These, so-called traditional layers were notorious in Iranian history for their blatant defence of self-interest in opposition to all other social layers, and for their constantly shifting alliances with all the different ruling foreign or indigenous politico-economic powers. Ever since the fall of the Safavid Empire in the 17th century the hand of these two groups can be detected in every major turning point within the long transition to capitalism. They bear the responsibility for almost every defeat. They were the ones who opposed the Constitutional Revolution and later helped the Shah to bring the Russian Cossack Army to defeat it. Half a century later in 1953, without the same hands, the Oil Nationalisation movement around Mossadegh would not have been defeated and the CIA coup to bring back the now *shahanshah* (king of kings) Mohammad Reza Pahlavi would not have succeeded.

In a way these social groups in Iran have always contained within them all the bourgeois-comprador genes of the earlier collaborations! At any one time in recent history one could find within these layers powerful lobbies/networks supporting US, British, French and even Russian/Soviet interests. Alongside and usually overlapping with these political networks, there were also mafia type business formations which had not only become the biggest landlords in Iran but dominated the entire distribution networks for centuries. The capitalist "modernization" under the Shah naturally called for a curtailment of the economic and social power that these two groups had enjoyed before. The type of deformed US- dominated and US-approved capitalist growth, however, not only did not weaken these layers but gave them a huge financial muscle to even mount a challenge against the Shah and his imperialist backers when precisely that type of capitalist growth reached its limits.

Thus, in terms of real historical outcomes, the tragedy of the Iranian revolution is that having succeeded in overthrowing the Shah and his USA backed capitalist cronies in 1979, it then handed power to the even more reactionary sections of the same ruling class whose lineage go back to the counter-revolution in 1906. It took the combined force of Iranian and Russian despotism 5 years to defeat the first revolution. The second, by allowing itself to become Islamic, had defeat already written on its forehead. By the time it claimed victory, it had already become what can only be called a *counter-revolutionary revolution!* A revolution against history. Thirty years later, there is absolutely no doubt that it has led to the rule of social layers from even darker corners of Iranian history than what was overthrown, and that the changes that it has caused in the underlying capitalist economy have allowed an even more despotic, monopolistic, corrupt

and dependent form of moribund capitalism to grow than what one could have ever imagined 30 years ago.

The story of the Iranian Islamic Revolution is therefore first and foremost the story of how a counter-revolution succeeded in hijacking a genuine popular revolution by being placed at its leadership. Was this retreat into history a peculiarly Iranian trait? Or is it to be accredited to the power of Islam? Khomeini himself claimed the invisible hand of God, but we need go no further than the world capitalist system and its leadership in the shape of US imperialism without whose very visible blood-stained hands none of the scenarios being played out even today could have ever become possible. The simple fact and now a well-documented one is that US imperialism, having tried every other alternative to save the bourgeois state in Iran, eventually turned to theocratic fascism to save its bacon in its hour of need. After 1906, it needed direct imperialist intervention to defeat the revolution, but in 1979 the "wiser" US imperialism which already enjoyed the loyalty of many faithful political and military instruments in Iran such as the Shah's secret services, SAVAK, and the Royal Army, simply made a deal with the Islamic counter revolution and persuaded its allies in the West and its servants inside Iran to help it to victory.

By backing an Islamisation of the Iranian revolution, imperialism did manage to defeat the real revolution and save the capitalist order in Iran but at the expense of creating a theocratic monster which has not only hurled back Iranian society to pre-19th century, but is also now a major reactionary force against all progressive and secular movements from South East Asia to North Africa and definitely in the entire Middle East. It is now even challenging the very US interests for the safeguard of which it was helped to power. But this is not the first instance of a rabid dog biting its owner. Indeed, given the strength of anti-US imperialist sentiments in the entire Middle East the more it bites the stronger it gets. When major sections of the anti-capitalist left in the West hail theocratic fascism as the latest champion of anti-imperialist struggles what can one expect of the down-trodden Palestinian masses in the Middle East left at the mercy of another rabid US dog?

This defeat highlights once again a seemingly permanent feature of our epoch. Capitalism continues to grow and dominate, even in its period of historical decline, but this domination simultaneously produces a cancerous spiral back into the pre-capitalist past. Iranian example shows that whilst the world capitalist system in decline may still be able to maintain a semblance of democracy in the metropolis, it can only achieve this by bolstering up theocratic fascism in the periphery. Imperialist export of capital can today be nothing but export of barbarism. 30 years on, the defeated revolution is once again gathering up the strength to challenge the ruling classes in Iran, but this vicious circle is also coming round. The imperialist sanctions and the threat of military intervention in Iran are once again bolstering up the most reactionary sections of the Iranian ruling class whilst simultaneously weakening and depoliticizing the progressive forces. Can anyone imagine that the latest imperialist plan for a new regime change in Iran will produce anything better than the one in 1979?

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