

May 68 & the Iranian Left

The student movement in Iran, especially since the CIA backed coup of 1953, has always been at the forefront of all progressive social and political movements. Given the long history of political repression in Iran, alongside a backward economy with an underdeveloped class struggle and underdeveloped socio-political structures, it is not surprising that universities with their large concentration of students have become centers of political activity. In fact the vast majority of the cadres of what now makes up the Iranian left has originated from the student movement. It is also not surprising that ruling classes in Iran have always meted out their worst repression against the student movement. As we speak now there are scores of student activists arrested nearly two months ago still languishing in the Islamic Republic's jails without any real news about the reason for their arrest or possible date of release; and in some cases not even their whereabouts. Mr Ahmadinezhad, the current executioner of the chief mullah, has now taken his revenge on students who at every opportunity over the last year have demonstrated their opposition to his abuse of their universities for his anti-Semitic anti-Western demagoguery.

If any one needs any proof that the mullahs' and merchants' so-called Islamic Revolution was in fact the counter revolution that hijacked and defeated the real popular revolution, then they should just look at the fact that at no time before the Feb Insurrection in 79 did any demonstration inside an Iranian university raise such a slogan. Or if any one still doubts that the new regime has never enjoyed even a simple electoral majority in Iran, must again just look at the Iranian student movement. How come a regime in power for nearly three decades has still no significant political base inside the universities?

During the 75-77 revolution the student movement played a major role not only in popularizing the idea and preparing the groundwork for it but also in being its most active participant. The last few weeks before the insurrection in Feb 79, Tehran University was under permanent siege by the army and the scene of daily clashes between students and soldiers with tanks and machine guns. In fact the seeds of what has been termed "the central idea" for the Iranian revolution of a general strike to overthrow the Shah, were planted by the student movement. The first time such a slogan was raised publicly was in 1975 by the student movement in Tehran.

After the overthrow of the Shah the universities were once again centers of struggle against the new regime. In the spring of 1980, Khomeini, realizing the left is going to win elections to almost every student council, ordered the occupation of all institutions of higher education. Radical students who fought for days were eventually overpowered by the armed thugs of the regime, many were shot on the spot or arrested and imprisoned (many of these were killed later in the mass executions of 1988). All institutions of higher education were then closed down for almost 2 years whilst the theocratic regime organized a complete purge of all opposition within both students and staff. Even today, after all this repression and continuous occupation, after 2 decades of ideological filtering (which is now part of the entry qualifications), and after all the machinations of the regime which has filled the universities with cronies and religious students with hundreds of religious activities, the student

movement today is still the most active opposition to the capitalist theocracy. Right now in Iran we are witnessing the formation of a most radical socialist trend in the entire region. Indeed one can say what happened in May 68 in Paris, where the brutal suppression of student protests by riot police eventually led to a general strike, is one of the most likely scenarios of how a mass revolt against the Islamic Republic can begin; and not in a too distant future. May 68 was killed, essentially by the French Stalinists, but it may yet come to life by the Iranian student movement.

Given this background one would think an event like May 68 must have had a profound effect on the Iranian student movement. But alas no! At least not as much as it should have. It definitely had an effect on a section of the student movement and the left in exile but not directly inside Iran. Here I have to rely on personal reminiscences as I was one of those affected. I came in my teens to London early in 1967 already familiar with the general political alignments inside Iran and with some experience of the student movement inside. Before I had a chance to learn the language I was confronted with LSE sit-ins in London and May 68 in Paris. You can imagine what an effect such events will have on a young student like me. To cut a long story short, soon few of us discovered each other and eventually set up a small study group to discuss the issues raised by this experience. This, eventually in 1971, led to the formation of the first tendency within the Iranian student movement which openly called for a socialist revolution. This group started publishing a socialist research journal called *kand o kav* (dig & search) and later joined the USecFI. In the revolution of 1975-77 this group was active inside and started publishing *che bayad kard* (what is to be done) before the insurrection. It later joined 2 other currents to form the Socialist Workers Party of Iran. Incidentally, despite whatever any body may claim now, almost 30 years after the event, this was the one and only political current on the left inside Iran which immediately after the insurrection called for the overthrow of the government appointed by the Islamic Revolutionary Council and correctly assessed it as a capitalist counter revolution. In a way, it is a bit of a logical leap to claim all this as an effect of May 68, but as a participant I know without it probably none of these would have happened.

In Europe itself, immediately after May 68, there was of course a lively debate which continued for years and profoundly affected the formation of the radical left every where. Some of us may still remember those populist theories about how the students have now become part of the new revolutionary mass vanguard or the over-the-top exaggerations of how universities have now become factories. All interesting debates and we followed them avidly. But the whole political atmosphere created because of May 68 also brought into focus a lot of other fundamental issues of revolutionary socialism long overshadowed by Stalinism. What interested us the most, for example, was the proof in May 68 for the actuality of the socialist revolution. If in advanced capitalist countries a socialist revolution can be sparked off with a student protest then what better proof does one need that the epoch we live in is indeed the epoch of decline of capitalism. This was the key which for us opened the entire road towards a total break with Stalinism.

As I mentioned earlier, inside Iran the situation was different. Although it has to be said that I know for a fact that two groups of students, in Mashhad and Shiraz had studied May 68 and even produced a paper in 1971. Interestingly, at that time they were not even socialist or Marxist, but by the time we met them they were and in fact

joined us in the Iranian SWP. But on the whole the radical left inside Iran was at that time pre-occupied with the issue of armed struggle and there are no evidence to suggest that May 68 had any influence on their later development. Regretably, one may add. Precisely because it equated radicalism with armed struggle and failed to break with the right wing on theoretical and programmatic grounds, it failed miserably when confronted with an actual revolution.

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