

Iran: with friends like these...

Iran is a country in which the USA and Britain have a history of interference. It's history was shaped by the overthrow of the Mossadeq government which had the audacity to nationalise Iranian oil. He was removed in a coup in 1953 supported and funded by the US and British governments. The price of this coup was paid by the Iranian people with the brutal regime of the Shah. One of the consequences of this dictatorial regime, with a complete absence of any freedom to organise, was the use of the mosque as a focus and a cover for opposition in the absence of any democratic framework for the struggle for democratic rights. In that sense Britain and the US share responsibility for the fact that Khomeini and the clerical regime emerged from the revolution of 1979 as a ruling elite.

This background of interference and the "anti-imperialist" language of the Iranian leaders has led some people on the left to see the current regime as an ally in the struggle against US imperialism. For instance, the Ministry of "Popular Power for Foreign Affairs" of Venezuela has issued a communique in relation to the crisis in Iran. It "expresses its firm opposition to the vicious and unfounded campaign to discredit the institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran" which apparently has been "unleashed from outside", designed "to roil the political climate of our brother country". The statement denounces "these acts of interference" in the internal affairs of the "Islamic Republic of Iran", while demanding an immediate halt to the manoeuvres to threaten and destabilise the "Islamic Revolution". The people and government of Venezuela are "certain that the Iranian people will find how to solve its internal affairs "and will continue the path of the Islamic Revolution".

Speaking to supporters Hugo Chavez called Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "a courageous fighter for the Islamic Revolution, the defence of the Third World, and in the struggle against imperialism". The Venezuelan government, "in the name of the people," hailed the "extraordinary democratic development" that resulted in Ahmadinejad's victory according to a foreign ministry statement.

These staggering statements by the Venezuelan government appear to be based on the delusion that Ahmadinejad is some sort of anti-imperialist because of his denunciations of US imperialism. My enemy's enemy is my friend, seems to be the guiding light of Chavez and the Venezuelan state. It would be perfectly correct to demand that the US government keep its nose out of the Iranian political crisis, but offering political support for the Iranian regime is choosing the wrong friend and can only compromise the Venezuelan government in the eyes of an Iranian democratic and workers' movement, and other workers around the world.

Continuing the path of the "Islamic Revolution" means in practice the imposition of repression of independent workers' organisations, of women and of youth, whose freedom is drastically curtailed by all sorts of moral police and religious thugs on a daily basis. Iran is a clerical dictatorship in which working class and socialist forces have no freedom to operate, never mind participate in the elections.

Following the election, Chavez was quick to telephone Ahmadinejad to congratulate him, saying the victory "represents the feeling and commitment of the Iranian people to building a new world." What sort of world is that? One in which gays are hung, that women are denied the freedom to dress and carry out their lives as they are pleased, that raped women are seen

as sinners, that workers leaders' are imprisoned for striking? Even a cursory examination of the reality of life in the "Islamic Republic" contrasts absolutely to the world that Chavez says he wants to build.

Rigged election?

According to the Guardian report on the election results there were at least some curious results when you compare them with the 2005 election. For instance in Lorestan, in 2005 Ahmadinejad received 9% of the vote, compared with 55% for Karroubi (also a candidate in 2009). Miraculously after 4 years in power Ahmadinejad increased his vote eightfold. Obviously a popular man. Karroubi's vote dropped to 5% this time, despite the fact that his campaign appeared to be going well. In Khuzestan the President increased his vote from 16% in 2005 to nearly 65% this time. In East Azerbaijan his vote increased slightly from 10% last time to nearly 57% in 2009. In Ardabil, a province of which he had been governor, and was not exactly popular, he won 7% last time and 51% today.

Elections in Iran, of course, are not free because no opponents of the "Islamic Revolution" are allowed to stand (unlike in Venezuela, of course, where opponents of Chavez could even collect signatures for a referendum to have him removed from office). Real power rests with the Council of Guardians which is a 12 man body made up of six high ranking Islamic clerics and six Islamic lawyers, selected by the Leader (currently Khamenei). It stands *above* the 'parliament' and can dismiss laws passed by it on the basis that they are unIslamic or against the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. Of the 400 people who put their names forward only four were accepted. Needless to say the 42 women candidates were rejected.

These results appear highly questionable, but even if the 64% vote were accurate, it would do nothing to alter the fact that the elections are not democratic in any acceptable sense of the term. It has been clear for a number of years now that young people in particular have been chafing at the petty restrictions imposed upon them by a state which imposes its religion and mores on them.

For the Venezuelan authorities to describe Ahmadinejad's declared victory as "an extraordinary democratic development", in an election in which any individual or organisation that had, for instance, the politics of Chavez would be barred from standing, is itself extraordinary for its lack of contact with reality.

In his Friday speech after the elections Khamenei said:

"These elections showed our religious democracy to the entire world. All those people who are ill-wishers towards the system witnessed what religious democracy really is.

This is a third way different from dictatorships and tyrannical systems on the one hand and democracies removed from spirituality and religion on the other. This is religious democracy. This is what attracts the hearts of people and brings them to the centre of the arena, and it just passed its test."

So a "religious democracy" is one in which anybody who does not agree with the system has no right to stand in elections, no freedom of expression. According to Khamenei, every last one of the 40 million people who voted in the election voted for "the path of the revolution".

And the mass of demonstrators, what are they?

“They are the ill-wishers, mercenaries and agents of the Western intelligence services and the Zionists.”

Alas the size of the demonstrations does somewhat contradict his assertion that “the people live in an atmosphere of trust, hope, and enthusiasm in this country”. How could it be otherwise when “the Islamic Republic system is one of the healthiest political and social systems in the world today.”

“21st Century Socialism”?

The mass movement in Latin America against the impact of neo-liberalism, which was first tested out on the continent, has created a series of radical government which have, to one degree or another broken with neo-liberalism. Venezuela, which has resisted attempts to derail it, for instance by the US supported coup in 2002, has been an inspiration to many people around the world for whom socialism has been put back on the agenda.

Hugo Chavez has spoken of building a “21st Century Socialism”. Venezuela has been seen as a beacon of hope for millions of people around the world. Yet support for the Iranian regime, can only undermine its standing amongst workers around the world and discredit the name of socialism. How can Venezuela support a regime which oppresses attempts of Iranian workers to form independent trades unions, and demands of all its citizens that they accept a state based on religious fundamentalism and in which 12 men can even overrule decisions of the Parliament (such as it is)?

If Hugo Chavez wants allies to “build a new world” then he should support the Iranian workers struggling for their independent trades unions and not a state apparatus which oppresses them and denies them their right to freely organisation.

In writing this piece, I have searched the web in vain for comment of Venezuela’s support for Ahmadinejad. Whether it is an embarrassed silence amongst supporters of Venezuela’s struggle I can only guess. However, it is surely the responsibility of the labour movement, and especially those who campaign for solidarity with Venezuela, to challenge this profound mistake of the Venezuelan government. They should call for an end to this support for Ahmadinejad, and an “Islamic Revolution” which denies democratic and trade union rights of its citizens.

The “anti-imperialism” of the Iranian regime rests upon the historical hostility of the Iranian masses for the US and British powers who were responsible for the downfall of Mossadeq, and the imposition of the bloody regime of the Shah. But it is a fake, designed to bind the Iranian population to the “Islamic Republic”. It is a Republic which has no place for socialism or socialists, be it of the 21st Century variety or any other. How can it be an ally of such a struggle?

And what of Mousavi?

Does any of this mean that Mousavi deserves our support. Of course not. He has been very much part of the Islamic regime for many years. No doubt many Iranians place their hopes in

him, essentially because they hope that their lives will be a little freer, if he had won. He appeals to this sentiment. For instance, interviewed by Al Jazeera he responded to a question of the policing of women's dress in the streets, that there should be no interference by the police into people's personal lives.

Writing on behalf of Mousavi in the Guardian an Iranian writer explained the aims of the struggle. It was not very radical. If he was elected President then this would be a counterweight to the 'Supreme Leader'.

Khamenei, in his speech pointed to the fact that the 'dispute' was between four candidates who were part of the system. That is true, but any mass movement struggling for freedom takes advantage of openings created by people who do not necessarily share their aims. Such was the vote and movement behind Mousavi.

Iranian workers

Socialists or consistent democrats cannot accept a state based on religion, of any sort. Of course, the Iranian people should determine their own future, but it is our responsibility to support those struggling for democratic and workers rights. To paint up this reactionary clerical regime as an ally of Venezuelan or any other workers is a grave error.

The Tehran bus workers have been at the forefront of the struggle for freedom of trade union organisation. Their leaders have been jailed, many activists sacked. They have been supported by an international trade union campaign. It is therefore interesting to hear what they say about the elections.

"During these past years the workers have been told to make sacrifices and to accept their hardship and their lack of rights. While the workers can neither go to work with security or hope, nor to their homes for rest, thousands of plain-clothes and security force [officers] - forces that perform no productive work and are used everywhere and for any deed that is necessary, with any level of violence and use of force - are kept to deprive and detain workers from a free life. Yet [the candidates] refuse to give up one day to talking about the workers' demands and needs."

I leave the last word to them.

"In recent days, we continue witnessing the magnificent demonstration of millions of people from all ages, genders, and national and religious minorities in Iran. They request that their basic human rights, particularly the right to freedom and to choose independently and without deception be recognized. These rights are not only constitutional in most of the countries, but also have been protected against all odds.

Amid such turmoil, one witnesses threats, arrests, murders and brutal suppression that one fears only to escalate on all its aspects, resulting in more innocent bloodshed, more protests, and certainly no retreats. Iranian society is facing a deep political-economical crisis. Million-strong silent protests, ironically loud with unspoken words, have turned into iconic stature and are expanding from all sides. These protests demand reaction from each and every responsible individual and institution.

As previously expressed in a statement published on-line in May of this year, since the Vahed Syndicate does not view any of the candidates support the activities of the workers' organizations in Iran, it would not endorse any presidential candidate in the election. Vahed members nevertheless have the right to participate or not to participate in the elections and vote for their individually selected candidate.

Moreover, the fact remains that demands of almost an absolute majority of the Iranians go far beyond the demands of a particular group. In the past, we have emphasized that until the freedom of choice and right to organize are not recognized, talk of any social or particular right would be more of a mockery than a reality.

The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company fully supports this movement of Iranian people to build a free and independent civil society and condemns any violence and oppression.

In line with the recognition of the labour rights, the Syndicate requests that June 26 which has been called by the International Trade Unions Organization 'Day of action' for justice for Iranian workers to include the human rights of all Iranians who have been deprived of their rights.

With hope for freedom and equality.”

These are the people Hugo Chavez should be supporting, not their oppressors.

Martin Wicks
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