Lessons (Not) Learned: Reflections on a Failed Revolution

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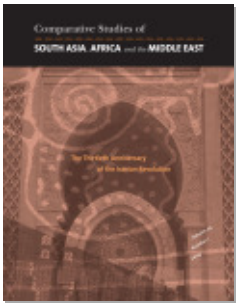

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Saeed Rahnema

Several years ago, while on a research project in the city of Ramallah, in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Haideh Moghissi and I, at the invitation of a section of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), gave a talk to the cadres on the experiences of the Left and nationalist forces during the Iranian revolution. On a hot summer day in the heart of the city, in a session chaired by Zahira Kamal, later the Palestinian National Authority's minister of women's affairs, we discussed why the relatively formidable secular Iranian opposition forces had been defeated by religious fundamentalists and fanatics after the 1979 revolution.

I posed two questions with regard to the Palestinian situation: first, whether the secular left forces in Palestine were prepared for and had a clear vision of the post-occupation period, and, second, whether they had a clear strategy vis-à-vis radical Islamist forces. I ventured that, with all due respect to the audience, the answers seemed to be negative in both cases and added that this was where the lessons of the Iranian revolution became relevant. In relation to the radical religious forces, in particular, I offered the opinion that most probably they would highjack the Palestinian resistance and suppress the secular elements if the latter were not prepared. Many in the audience disagreed, saying that the Palestinian religious forces were not fanatics like the zealots in Iran. A few suggested that I did not have an accurate understanding of the Palestinian movement. Tragically, time proved them wrong. In a matter of a few years, Hamas and Islamic Jihad turned the decades-long, secular Palestinian movement into a religious campaign and, even with partial victories in Gaza, started to suppress and kill many secular individuals and impose their social and religious conservatism on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Ironically, they also gained the implicit and explicit support of many respectable left and secular Palestinian leaders of the National Front and the Democratic Front. Other sections of the Palestinian leadership, engulfed in the corruption and nepotism of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), worked with the Israelis in the hope of a peaceful settlement. Although set in a very different context, the Iranian revolution and the plight of its secular and liberal Left had some important lessons for its Palestinian counterparts (as well as for the future of the Left movement in Iran).

The Iranian revolution of 1979, with its original demands of national independence, democracy, political freedoms, and social justice in one of the most powerful and largest countries of the Middle East, was no doubt one of the outstandingly important events of the twentieth century. Yet it gave rise to a religious obscurantist regime. Thirty years after those memorable days, it is still hard to believe that a reactionary cleric, whose historical counterpart in the first Iranian revolution of 1906 was executed by revolutionaries for his demands for an Islamic state, could take advantage of the economic and political crisis, ride the tides

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of discontent, and through manipulation of the religious beliefs of the masses and illusions of an "anti-imperialist" stance establish a Shariabased state. It is hard to believe that more than a century of untiring effort and struggle by generations of Iranian intellectuals and politicians to modernize their county would be lost to the forces of regression.

The nature of the last shah's dictatorial regime, foreign intervention, certain characteristics of the political opposition, and the influence of Shi'i Islamists are forces involved in this tragedy. The shah, almost right to the end of his regime, had remained oblivious to the failures of many of his policies and the sufferings of the majority of working people; even his closest associates did not dare to remind him of the "shortages of electricity." He was also not fully informed about the growing "religious opposition," which he referred to as "Islamic Marxists supported by the Soviets."[1] As for foreign intervention, during the last days of the revolution, Americans, fearful of the increasing influence of the Left, ordered their subordinate Iranian generals to surrender to Ruholla Khomeini, thereby prematurely ending the uprising. Had it not been for this intervention and, later, the Iraqi invasion and the ensuing long Iran-Iraq war, the secular left and liberal forces would have had a better chance of confronting the Islamists in Iran. This is not to suggest that they were necessarily capable of winning over the revolution, but they could at least have resisted its complete takeover and thereby limited the Islamist onslaught.

The uprising was begun by secular intellectuals, students, lawyers, teachers, workers, and government employees, but in the absence of any effective secular leadership, Khomeini and his followers came to lead the revolution and turn it into a mass movement. Despite his claims while in exile in Paris, Khomeini did not want to share any aspect of the revolution with others; in fact, he called it an Islamic revolution and the country an Islamic republic. From the outset, the new regime's totalitarian and monopolizing tendencies alienated and excluded from decision-making processes the left and secular forces that had been at the forefront of the revolution. The new regime targeted not just the nonreligious Left but also religious groups and organizations that did not share in the extreme obscurantism of Khomeinists. A case in point was the Organization of People's Mojahedin, an eclectic Muslim organization that combined aspects of Islam and socialism; after engaging in guerrilla operations against the shah's regime, it became the most powerful opposition group after the revolution—before it was brutally suppressed.

The provisional revolutionary government of Mehdi Bazargan, led by liberal Muslims and nationalists, was ineffective; it had very limited power delegated to it by Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council and in any case was afraid of introducing major economic and political changes. This angered the revolutionaries who were expecting immediate, dramatic changes to all aspects of polity, society, and economy.

The Left Unprepared

For decades before the revolution and in the period leading to the fall of the shah's regime, the secular left and liberal forces, while a minority, were the dominant voices in oppositional politics, as well as in the arts, literature, and other cultural domains of Iran. But prolonged suppression, not to mention the elimination of its prominent leaders by the shah's regime, had rendered the Left politically weak and in disarray. The release of political prisoners at the dawn of the revolution, and the return of exiles, led to the formation of a wide range of left political organizations. These included the Tudeh Party, the long-established traditional pro-Soviet party; the Fedaian, which had emerged from the earlier guerrilla movement, turning into the most popular left organization; the Workers Path, which consisted mostly of former political prisoners; several Maoist organizations, notably the ultraradical Paykar; and several other organizations originating in the Confederation of

1. The last volume of the memoirs of Assadollah Alam, the shah's closest confidant and minister of the imperial court, covers the period up to 1977 and is very revealing in this regard. He is even fearful of telling the shah that the country's power grid is not providing enough electricity and that people are unhappy; when he eventually ventures to write to the shah, he is fearful that he may not appreciate the information. See Alinaghi Alikhani, *Yad-dasht-haye Alam* (*The Alam Diaries*), vol. 6, *1355–1356* (*1976–1977*) (Bethesda, MD: Ibex, 2008), 441, 537.

Iranian Students abroad, including Left Unity, Communist Unity, and the Communist Union; and finally the Kurdish organizations, such as the long-established and moderate Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), and the then newly established radical Komala.

The multitude of voices on the left, with their conflicting slogans, had created confusion and an ideological/political mess. The fact was that the Left was confused, generally, about the nature of the new regime and how to deal with it. For the first time it was confronted with a political system that had come to power with the support of the "masses" and, in many ways, seemed to be different from the imperial dictatorships of the previous periods. Confusion and disagreement over the nature of the regime, as well as the nature of the "socialist camp," led to many splits, breakups and internal fighting, particularly within the Left's largest and most influential group, the Organization of Iranian People's Fedaian (OIPF).

Amazed at their sudden and massive popularity, members of the Fedaian were not clear as to what to do with their newly found strength. Their headquarters in central Tehran, in a building taken over from the shah's intelligence and security agency, SAVAK, was constantly surrounded by new sympathizers and frequented by people from all walks—including jet fighter pilots, army officers, labor activists, lawyers, medical doctors, and artists—asking for advice. The newly formed Central Committee, mostly comprising former political prisoners affiliated with the Fedai Guerrillas, was understandably unprepared for the onslaught and had no clear strategy or perspective. Years of imprisonment and/or having to live underground in safe houses and constantly on the run from the shah's secret police had trained them as combatants, but not necessarily as strategists capable of leading an organization with such a massive following. Soon a newly formed structure was put in place that brought together close sympathizers and activists from among professionals and intellectuals who had worked in public and private institutions in the previous regime and had a somewhat better understanding of how Iranian society had evolved over the years. A select number of activists and sympathizers from among Iranian students abroad were also added to the new structure. I have discussed elsewhere the notion that a combination of professional revolutionaries and revolutionary professionals could have made the organization much stronger, yet each side had its doubts about the other. The first group was unsure of the depth of political commitment of the latter, and the second unsure of the capabilities of the former.[2] Similar to the Palestinian situation after the Oslo II agreement, when the old guards were put in charge of different levels of decision making, the main positions of hierarchy in the Fedaian organization, from the commissions of the Central Committee to provincial, city, and local committees and cells, were filled with trusted comrades not necessarily capable of leading the units under their control. The leadership could not take advantage of the synergy of the groups, and soon political differences on pressing issues among the top leaders led to divisions and infighting.

Apart from earlier splits through which one group had rejected guerrilla tactics and joined the Tudeh Party and another, the ultra-radical group led by the celebrated guerrilla woman, Ashraf Dehghani, had separated, the OIPF faced a major split in 1980, when a section known as the OIPF "Aghaliat" (Minority) and advocating a radical platform separated from the "Aksariat" (the Majority, renamed thereafter OIPF Majority). Later, another group called Jenah-e Chap (the Left Wing) broke away from the OIPF Majority and subsequently joined with the OIPF Minority. In the absence of the radical elements, most of the leadership of the OIPF Majority moved closer to the Tudeh Party. In 1981, when the majority of the leadership decided to dissolve the organization and join the Tudeh Party, another major split occurred. The section opposing unification with the Tudeh Party dropped "Majority" from its name and continued its activities as OIPF.[3]

2. Saeed Rahnema, "The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Iran," in *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 253–54.

3. See Saeed Rahnema, *Re-birth of Social Democracy in the Iranian Left Movement* (*Tajdid-e Hayat-e Social Demokrasi dar Iran*) (Stockholm: Baran, 1996).

These splits, particularly the last one, accompanied all sorts of accusations, personality clashes, and sometimes unethical behavior, notably on the part of the leaders of the OIPF Majority and Tudeh Party, who, for example, spread rumors that the departing group was suspect. Although many prominent and well-known Fedais had joined the split, the Tudeh and the OIPF Majority intentionally branded them the "Keshtgar-Halilrudi" group, even threatening that they would pass on the names of the fractional leaders to the Islamic secret police.[4]

All these splits among the Fedaian, and those of other left organizations, culminating in the creation of some several dozen groups and organizations, in effect could be narrowed down to two distinct approaches: those who confronted the new regime and those who supported it. Both tendencies, ironically, were based on populist perspectives. The Tudeh Party, following the Soviet Union's foreign policy and impressed with the overthrow of the pro-American shah, wholeheartedly supported the new regime from its inception. Not having much credibility among intellectuals and the public because of its known close links with the Soviets, it did not attract much attention in the beginning. The Tudeh Party's policy of supporting the Islamic regime, however, was greatly strengthened when the OIPF Majority supported this policy. The OIPF splinter organization, though following somewhat different policies in relation to the regime and "the socialist camp," did not confront the regime immediately. Nonetheless, many of its leaders, including Habatollah Moini (Homayoon) and Mehrdad Pakzad, were subsequently executed. Behrooz Soleimani valiantly jumped to his death from the window of his fifth-floor apartment in Tehran when the Islamic Guards discovered his hiding place.

Other left organizations fared no better. The more radical groups, including the OIPF Minority, were brutally routed out by the regime, as was Paykar. Of those left organizations originating from the Confederation of Iranian Students abroad, the Union of Communists/Sarbedaran waged hasty, immature rural guerrilla warfare in the forests of the Caspian region in northern Iran with the illusion of igniting a peasants' revolt and securing their support, but many of them were killed, arrested, and executed. Other organizations, such as the Left Unity and the Communist Union, followed more mature policies, but their voices were lost in the overall confusion of the period. The Left Unity had joined the National Democratic Front of Iran (NDFI), which was led by a celebrated political prisoner of the shah's period, Shokrollah Paknezhad, and advocated a reformist democratic socialist project. Initially, it attracted much attention, but growing repression by the new regime and lack of support and even denigration by larger left organizations weakened the front, which for the first time had brought both liberal democrats and left activists together.

The left and secular forces and the Mojahedin were influential in workplaces, in universities and other educational institutions, and in the regions and territories of national and ethnic minorities. Soon all of these sites became scenes of bloody confrontation between these oppositional forces and the new regime. The suppressive and monopolizing policies of the regime were the main reason for such confrontations, but the uncalculated and at times unrealistic demands of many left groups were also responsible for the early clashes with the new regime.

In a multinational and multiethnic country such as Iran, with centuries of regional dep-

4. Ali Keshtgar (the pseudonym of M. A. Farkhondeh), although a well-known activist and intellectual with links to the organization at the time of the shah, was not a political prisoner and was not considered old guard, despite the fact that he had played very important functions, among others, being the spokesperson of the Fedaian organization during the revolution, a member of the Central Committee, and head of the Economic Commission of the Central Committee. Halilrudi (the pseudonym of the late Manoucher Shafie) was a member of the Economic Commission. This commission, which consisted of five well-known academics and professionals, came to play a central role in theorizing and policy proposals and was instrumental in the split, along with its subcommittees separated from the organization in toto. Manoucher was the only member who had come from outside Iran and was an activist of the Confederation of Iranian Students abroad. Nouredin Kianouri, in one of his interviews, announced that similar to early periods when the British imperialists used to send agents to join the communist movement in Iran, American imperialists had sent Halilrudi to infiltrate the movement. Under intense pressures, Shafie became sick and passed away. After the last meeting between two of the leaders of the split, Habatollah Moini (Homayoon) and A. Keshtgar, with Farrokh Negahdar, leader of the Majority and Nouredin Kianoori, the secretary-general of the Tudeh Party, Homayoon told the Economic Commission members that Negahdar had put a list of leading dissenting members on the table and threatened that, in case of a split, his organization would pass its information on these members on to the Islamic secret police.

rivations and suppression of national and ethnic minorities by the central government, demands and expectations were at their highest after the revolution. Calls for autonomy or independence were soon used by different left organizations that had established offices and bases in the Kurdish, Azeri, Turkmen, Baluch, and Arab areas and supported the creation of different peoples' councils, or *showra*s. Many of them clashed with one another in these areas over tactics and strategy. In the Kurdish areas, as a result of the strength of the local organizations such as the KDPI and Komala, the new regime was weaker than in other areas, and the resulting political freedoms had attracted many different organizations. The new central government was afraid of the growing strength of the secular progressive forces in this region, and under the direct order of Khomeini the Kurdish regions were invaded and brutally suppressed. After the defeat of the opposition forces in Turkmen-Sahra and Kurdistan, many Fedai commanders, fighters, and activists were sent to Tehran. This caused some difficulties for the organization in terms of housing the newcomers and finding appropriate positions for them in the organization. At a later stage many of them were hunted down by the Islamic Guards and executed.

The Left and the Labor Movement

With the intensification of the economic crisis of 1978 and the gradual weakening of the shah's regime, workers and employees of public and private institutions had begun to push for economic demands, leading to sporadic strikes and, eventually, the formation of "strike committees." Many of these committees soon adopted the name *showra*. As the name was popularized, workers and employees in other factories also established their own such councils, and, in the absence of the managers or owners of these factories, *showra*s came to control many institutions.

Most of the *showra*s in the large- and medium-sized factories were originally organized by left-leaning individuals or sympathizers of left organizations and the Mojahedin. This was true of powerful councils such as the workers and employees *showra*s of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), the National Iranian Steel Company (NISC), the Union of Councils of Gilan Region, and particularly the Union of the Workers and Employees' Councils of the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO), the largest industrial conglomerate in the country, consisting then of 110 large corporations and projects. Of the thirteen founding members who came from different affiliate organizations to form the IDRO Union, almost all were left leaning. Most of us did not know one another before the first meeting, and, considering the atmosphere of the time, we tried hard to include some non-left founding members before organizing the first congress of the IDRO Union. After the first congress, in which more than three hundred delegates representing ninety large industrial units from different regions of Iran elected the two governing bodies of the union—that is, the fifty-five-member Central Council and the sixteen-member Executive Committee—more non-left-leaning and religious members were added to the leadership of the union.

The large *showra*s had played a crucial role in toppling the shah's regime, and in the beginning they were very influential in decision making in their institutions. For example, the IDRO Union was so influential that it refused to work with the new IDRO chief executive officer (CEO) appointed by the provisional government of Bazargan, despite the fact that he was the son-in-law of Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, a most popular moderate cleric of the time. Instead, the government appointed a CEO who was a *showra* member and was nominated by the IDRO Union. As for other top management positions in industries affiliated with the IDRO, I recall that we would go to different factories to replace top managers with the newly formed *showra* of the factory. Many new top managers were selected with the consultation of the union.

Confrontations between *showra*s and management, however, were inevitable. This was partly because of the tendency of the new government, and many new managers, to try to maintain the status quo or to change it very cautiously and slowly. But it was also the result of radical and unrealistic demands on the part of *showra*s looking for drastic change overnight. The workers had endured decades of exploitation, harsh working conditions, and low pay

under the shah's regime and rightly expected drastic improvements in industrial relations and their working and living conditions. Many of these expectations could be achieved with the right policies and good management, but the new government was slow and reluctant to make such changes and at the same time did not have the immediate resources to fulfill all the legitimate demands with which it was presented. The demands made by some *showra*s, however, were illogical and impractical. For example, in the Shahi (now Ghaim-Shahr) Jute plant, one of the old industries of the IDRO, the *showra* had unanimously approved that all the workers laid off in the previous fifteen years (numbering more than one thousand) be rehired by the factory. The new top management called us and explained that the factory could not even maintain its existing level of nine hundred workers and employees, let alone more than doubling its personnel. The union could not possibly agree with the *showra*, and the majority did not support the move, which angered the *showra*. In another case, the *showra* of the Tractor Assembly Plant in Tabriz unanimously decided to shorten the workweek to five days without considering the financial and production implications of such a change.

The left organizations, each claiming to represent the working class, were all excited about the concept of the *showra*s. The lack of experience of the Left and of the Mujahid activists, and their erroneous understanding of democratic organizations, led them (myself included) to try to make the councils appendages of their political organizations. Councils became sites of competition rather than cooperation among these activists. Most left organizations celebrated the *showra*s as organs of "workers' control" but were in theory and in practice confused about them. Were the *showra*s supposed to act as Soviet-type organs aimed at a socialist project? Or were they intended to implement some sort of industrial democracy in a corporatist fashion? Some viewed the *showra*s as distinct from trade unions, while others emphasized the duality of their functions.[5]

The Islamic regime had no faith in the *showra*s and no influence on them either; in the beginning, it had no other choice but to tolerate them. The new government tried to bring the *showra*s under its own control, and when that did not succeed it moved to destroy them and began to establish its own yellow "Islamic councils" with the help of the "Islamic associations" that had sprung up in most workplaces, acting like fascist-type organizations.

Even without brutal suppression by the regime, which was the main reason for the quick demise of the *showra*s, they were doomed to failure. Their breakdown was the result of a combination of factors, such as the nature of the industrial working class in Iran, the nature of Iranian industry, and characteristics of the *showra*s themselves. The industrial working class was relatively small, scattered throughout many small- and medium-sized workshops in a limited number of large industries. With low levels of productivity, Iranian industries were to a large extent reliant on government subsidies and could not survive independently. The *showra*s were separate "enterprise" or "house" agencies that were not linked together through an all-embracing organization at the regional and national levels. Hence, they could not pool their resources to confront the growing list of antidemocratic measures imposed by the Islamic regime. The Union of Showras mentioned above was just a loose umbrella organization of separate "house" *showra*s. They had no formal dues-paying membership registration.

The *showra*s, particularly in large industries, comprised both blue-collar and white-collar workers and employees with different demands and ideologies. While this structure had its advantages—for instance, the salaried employees could provide technical and managerial capabilities that the majority of workers lacked—the tensions arising from differences in status, income, and political demands were undeniable.

The *showra*s, like work councils in other parts of the world, emerged at a time of crisis. In cases where councils had longer life spans,

5. For details, see Saeed Rahnema, "Work Councils in Iran: The Illusion of Worker Control," *Economic and Industrial Democracy: An International Journal* 13 (1992): 69–94.

as in the early stages of the Weimar Republic, they altered their managerial functions and acted as bargaining arms of the trade unions. No other example existed where work councils functioned as workers' control in a strict sense, that is, in the control of production, management, and distribution processes. Instead, in some democratic countries with relatively strong labor movements, different forms and degrees of industrial democracy or workers' participation were achieved.

In the absence of strong trade union organizations and other democratic institutions, the role of *showra*s in terms of upholding the interests of the working class was very limited. Under such difficult conditions, the Left should have pushed for the establishment of industrial trade unions at the national and regional levels and supported *showra*s as their participatory arms. Yet in the confusing time of the revolution, the growing disunity and infighting among the left and other secular forces, and the speed with which the Islamists and their fascist-like organizations consolidated their power, this was not possible. The takeover of the American embassy by Muslim students and the subsequent hostage crisis had added to the confusion. The Iraqi invasion of Iran gave the best excuse to the regime to move toward its final assault on the *showra*s, expelling their activists, jailing many of them, and executing some, including Mahmood Zakipour of the IDRO Union.

The Left, while truly concerned about the conditions of the working class and striving toward representing its demands, had no clear understanding of what constituted it; its segmentations and heterogeneity were unclear. While none of the left organizations had clearly defined the working class, it was obvious they had in mind wage-earning, blue-collar industrial workers, in theory separating them from the salaried, white-collar employees whom they considered the petit bourgeoisie, or new middle class. The fact not taken into consideration was that this portion of the working population constituted but a minority, not a majority, of the demographic for which the left organizations—on their behalf and with their support—wanted to form a working-class party and establish a socialist workers' state. Moreover, despite exaggerated glorifications in left organizations and left-leaning literature, the vast majority of the wage workers, as a result of decades of suppression, a lack of independent trade unions, and limited experience of organization, not to mention low levels of education and the influence of the state's ceaseless anticommunist propaganda, were alien or even hostile to socialist and communist ideologies. The percentage of left-leaning and socialist sympathizers was much higher among salaried white-collar workers and employees. However, these strata were too heterogeneous in terms of demands, income, and social status and ideology, making it very hard for any one political organization to claim their representation. The fact was that the Left, despite its repeated claims of representing the working class, had only very limited social bases among the blue-collar wageworkers. At the same time, it ignored the demands and aspirations of the white-collar salariats who, ironically, constituted its own main social base, and in the process lost their support.

The Left and the Liberal and Religious Forces

Since the early twentieth century in Iran, the three ideologies and political forces of socialism, nationalism, and Islamism have confronted autocratic rule and competed with one another in periods when party politics was possible. These contending forces, to varying degrees, have followed different strategies, ranging from liberal reformism to radical sectarianism. Iranian socialists, in the earlier periods, embraced moderate and reformist tendencies. Cases in point, in addition to the social democrats of the turn of the twentieth century, were the moderate Ferq-e Jomhouri-e Enghelabi Iran (Revolutionary Republican Party of Iran) and the minority faction of the Communist Party in the early 1920s, which in contrast to the Comintern-supported majority, called for a parliamentary struggle within the framework of a single front of nationalist and democratic forces.[6] Even in the failed

6. For the program of the minority group, see Hamid Ahmadi, *Red Star and the History of the Communist Party of Iran* (*Setareh Sorkh, Tarikh-cheh Hezb-e Kommunit-e Iran*) (Stockholm: Baran, 1993).

Jangal-i movement in Gilan in the Caspian region around the same time, there were instances of collaboration between nationalists and socialists. There are a few other cases in later periods, most notably the establishment of the Jamiyat Socialist-e Tudeh (Socialist Tudeh Society) and later Nirouy-e Sevom (Third Force), formed by Khalil Maleki in 1947, which advocated reformist social democracy and collaboration with the nationalists led by Mohammad Mosaddeq. As mentioned earlier, during the 1979 revolutionary period as well, a part of the Left, led by the Left Unity, joined forces with the NDFI.

These were all exceptional instances in the long and bloody history of the Iranian Left. A combination of factors, including intense political suppression by the state, denigration by the radical Left, internal division, and international intervention made these experiments short-lived and unsuccessful. Other than these exceptions, left organizations in Iran have always suffered from sectarianism, not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to nationalists and liberal Muslims.

Relations between left organizations and nationalists in Iran have always been strained. At the height of the nationalist movement during the Mosaddeq era, in line with policies of the Soviet Union, which was suspicious that Mosaddeq was pro-American, the Tudeh Party used its influence in trade unions and organized many antigovernment strikes that further weakened the nationalist government. This was a time when the Mosaddeq government was operating under severe international sanctions as a result of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. At the time of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coup in 1953, the Tudeh Party came to the support of Mosaddeq, but it was too late to prevent his removal from office. The hostilities, however, were two-sided, and the nationalists never sought or showed any willingness to collaborate with the Left. On several occasions, Mosaddeq turned a blind eye when the ultranationalist parties associated with his National Front and their thugs would attack and disrupt Tudeh Party gatherings. There is no doubt that the British plots to exaggerate the role and the "threat" of the Tudeh Party and communist takeover had a strong impact on deteriorating relations between the Tudeh and the nationalists.[7] The nationalists, chiefly representing the industrial and commercial capitalists of Iran, were also fearful of the Left's anticapitalist policies and slogans and mainly remained silent when the Left came under brutal suppression by the state.

The hostilities came to the fore again during the 1979 revolution. The provisional government of Bazargan was formed by liberal nationalists in a period in which the Islamists had not yet consolidated their power and the Left was strongest in the *showra*s, universities, and regions of national minorities. The Left in general had a hostile attitude toward the liberal provisional government, which also faced all sorts of limitations caused by Khomeini's associates and the Islamists in the Revolutionary Council. On one occasion the Fedaian Organization issued a communiqué in favor of the government that delighted Bazargan so much that he publicly expressed his appreciation of the support. Immediately after that, however, the Fedaian issued another communiqué denouncing the Bazargan government. While the provisional government suffered from and was responsible for many shortcomings, above all its indecisiveness and its desire to maintain the status quo, it was tolerant of the *showra*s and their left-leaning supporters. It was after the fall of the liberal government subsequent to the hostage taking in the American embassy that the new Islamist government started its full assault against the *showra*s and the Left.

It must be noted that the nationalists in Iran were always closer to the Islamists and less heedful of their danger. Mosaddeq and his National Front maintained a strong link with and sought the support of the clerics led by Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani, who at the most crucial time, during the CIA coup, abandoned Mosaddeq and sided with the military and the shah. Mosaddeq, in the early history of the National Front, even had close ties with Navab Safavi, the

7. See, among others, Gholamreza Nejati, *Twenty-Five Years of Iranian Political History* (*Tarikh-e Siasi-e Bist-o Panj Saleh Iran*) (Tehran: Rasa Cultural Services Institute, 1992), 18–24.

ultraradical fundamentalist leader of the terrorist Fedaian-e Islam. During the revolution it was the strong ties between the clerics and the religious nationalists of the Freedom Movement of Bazargan that led to his appointment as prime minister.

The relations between the Left and religious forces in Iran historically have been much worse and mutually hostile. The Iranian Left has traditionally considered Islam to be a monolithic religion, not distinguishing between its rationalist and literalist traditions. Atheism within the Left involved anti-religiosity and, for many, a desire for its total elimination. While in theory they all advocated secularism and separation of church and state and tolerating religion in the "private" domain, none of Iran's left organizations had a clear vision as what to do about it in the public sphere. With the 1979 revolution and the rise to power of the Islamists, part of the Left, led by the Tudeh Party and then the OIPF Majority, following their populist perspective and under the illusion of Islamist "anti-imperialism," sacrificed their secularism and supported the Islamic state. In the other extreme, radical left populists continued their total and overall rejection of Islam.

The presidency of Mohammad Khatami and the growing prominence of some Muslim activists calling for reform of the regime created much excitement among some groups, including a section of the Left. However, the illusions gradually faded as the two terms of his presidency failed to achieve much, partly because of the intrigues of the more conservative and fundamentalist Muslims and partly because of the inactions of Khatami and his associates. These religious state reformers never attempted to have any relations with the nonreligious secular intellectuals or political activists or even to recognize their existence. They conveniently divided religious elements into "left" and "right" and deliberately ignored the existence of a very strong secular nonreligious force that has been silenced and suppressed by the Islamic regime.

Outside the regime, however, a growing trend of secularist tendencies among religious reformers is noticeable, both among clerics and lay individuals. The likes of Akbar Ganji, Hojattol-islam Mohsen Kadiver, Hojattol-Islam Hassan Eshkevari (who recently was defrocked by a religious court), and Reza Alijani, with their bold and innovative interpretations of Islam, are new breeds of genuine Muslim reformers outside the regime that the Left needs to recognize.

Thirty Years Later

In the incredible and lengthy three decades of Islamist rule in Iran, the postrevolutionary clerical oligarchy went through various transformations. After the long and futile Iran-Iraq war, which the Iranian regime stubbornly continued after its first successful defensive phase and desperate of failure, the Islamists, under the direct order of Khomeini, massacred more than five thousand political prisoners in 1988, mostly Mojahedin and activists from left organizations. Subsequent to Khomeini's death came Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's neoliberal policies, which expanded and strengthened the new capitalist class of clerics, their families, and military/Islamic Guard officers, as well as expanding the new middle classes and severely widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The suppression of the Left continued, and the regime resorted to "chain assassinations" of liberal and left-leaning intellectuals and political activists.

Then came eight years of Khatami with his slogan of reform. With the failure of Khatami's reformists, the marginalized masses rallied around the crude populism of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A military-clerical alliance pushed back the "traditional right" clerics and established the most obscurantist version of Islamic fundamentalism in postrevolutionary Iran.

Despite the reign of terror and the jailing and silencing of dissent, however, a vibrant civil society continues to challenge the establishment. The Islamic regime has miserably failed to "Islamify" Iranian society and establish its promised "government of the dispossessed." It failed to force Iranian women to accept the regime's desired Islamic role models. The youth of Iran, all born under Islamic rule, have rebelled against them. Corruption abounds in unprecedented proportions, as do poverty, prostitution, and drug addiction. The regime has remained in power by relying on outright suppression of dissent. The women's movement, student unrest, and workers' strikes are on the rise. Although left organizations inside the country were bru-

tally crushed, left tendencies are growing among youth and students. The left organizations survived in exile, some changing politics and some continuing along the same lines. In a sense, the two extreme tendencies of the revolutionary period, those seeking alliance with elements in the Islamic regime and those seeking the regime's complete eradication, continue.

On the far right of the Left continuum, the OIPF Majority entered into cooperation with the Democratic Party of the People of Iran (DPPI), a splinter group of the Tudeh Party that for a while advocated "democratic socialism," and the Organization of National Republicans of Iran (ONRI), a frontlike organization consisting of liberal and some left activists.[8] These organizations, along with other liberal left, including some of the former leaders of OIPF, became more hopeful after the 1997 election of Khatami as president; despite setbacks, they still hope to be find collaborators from within the ranks of Muslim reformers in the regime. The accommodating liberal Left fails to appreciate the simple fact that, as long as the clerical regime enjoys a monopoly of power, it will not seek an alliance with any other force, particularly with secular or left liberals. Even if they are allowed to become active in the Islamic regime's electoral process, it is not clear on what basis the Iranian working class and general public could differentiate them from other liberals, nationalists, or the moderate Islamists.

On the far left side of the continuum, in addition to different OIPF Minority groups, are the Worker-Communist Party of Iran (WPI), a product of a split in the Communist Party of Iran (CPI-Komala), and the CPI itself. After the death of its leader, Mansoor Hekmat, the WPI split further into four groups and organizations. These organizations, to varying degrees, call for an immediate socialist revolution and reject liberalism as a bourgeois phenomenon. They also emphasize democracy, but their notion of democracy is in line with the historic conviction that the only true democracy is the dictatorship of the proletariat, or some variation of a workers' state.

The simplistic and utopian solutions of the ultraradical left organizations in Iran are completely out of line with the country's exceedingly complex political and socioeconomic problems. However, these factions continue to compete with one another in making promises to the workers from afar.[9]

Other radical organizations, despite their calls for an immediate socialist revolution, are relatively less idealistic and more balanced. They include the Rah-e Kargar, which joined with several other groups to form the Left Workers Unity, and the Union of People's Fedaian (UPFI). These two groups, along with the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (DPKI), formed the Unity of Action for Democracy and cooperate in their struggle against the Islamic government.

One noticeable change among organizations on the left is Komala. Starting from an ultraradical platform during the revolution and then going through many splits and mergers, a section of Komala led by Abdullah Mohtadi separated itself from the CPI and now has put forward a drastically different program based on a sort of social democratic perspective, rejecting the notion of the "dictatorship of the proletariat."[10] Of the left activists originating from the prerevolutionary student movement abroad, some groups formed Showray-e Movaghat Socialistha-ye Chap-e Iran (the Provisional Council of Left Socialists of Iran), which advocates socialism with democracy and a reformist platform.

Overall, after thirty years, it is unfortunate that evidently both sections of the organized Left—liberal and radical—have failed to provide the sound theoretical and organizational basis necessary for the creation of an effective left alternative ready to play a significant role in Iranian politics. The accommodating lib-

8. For this section I have drawn from my earlier article, Rahnema, "Left and the Struggle for Democracy."

9. As an example, the WPI in its program written in 1995, among other things, promises an immediate six-hour working day/thirty-hour workweek (which includes the time spent for transportation to and from work, lunchtime, shower, training, and union activities), with no overtime allowable. The working hours are promised to be reduced further every five years. In the program, the minimum wage is determined solely by the workers' representatives, and they are to adjust it regularly themselves. If the workers were to go on strike, they would continue to receive their regular full pay and benefits, and no authority would have the right to decree back-to-work legislation. The program contains many other fantastic promises. See "A Better World: Programme of the Worker-communist Party of Iran," http://www.m-hekmat.com/en/o6ooen.html, from the WPI's website, www.wpiran.org/english.htm. The other CPI and OIPF Minority programs share, more or less, the same promises.

10. See Abdollah Mohtadi's interview with A. Mokri, http://news.gooya.com/ , 11 August 2008.

eral Left, by just adding its voice to those of the liberal nationalists or pragmatic Islamists, has made itself redundant as a secular left alternative. The radical Left, by ignoring the actual social realities of today's Iran and repeating old dogma, has also made itself irrelevant. Outside the organized Left, both in exile and in Iran, however, there are a growing number of left-leaning individuals who are critical of both of these tendencies and seek other alternatives.

For the Left to play a serious role in Iranian politics, it needs first and foremost to develop theoretical and analytical frameworks reflecting the present realities of Iranian society and economy and to forge meaningful links with diverse classes and strata of the working population. For the liberal Left, which has compromised its secularism and sought alliance with the Islamic reformers, the main question is whether it is any different from liberal, non-left nationalists and religious reformers. As for the radical left organizations, they should sincerely reflect on a set of compelling questions. The first is, with whose support and how, in reality and not dreams, can they bring about an immediate socialist revolution? They should also clarify what constitutes the working class. Does it include salaried white-collar workers and employees? If so, what are the political implications and impact of platforms the Left puts forward to attract their support?

Other questions include the following:

- Could socialism be achieved without strong mass support and participation of the working class?
- Could the working classes be mobilized and gain class consciousness without genuine, autonomous trade unions?
- Could genuine trade unions be established without the existence of a democratic system?
- Could a democratic system exist without the support and involvement of different parties representing a variety of perspectives and social classes?

These questions might appear as bourgeois and academic to individuals and groups that believe that the working class is ready for a socialist revolution and is waiting for its "vanguards." But for those who base their analysis on the actual objective and subjective conditions of a specific, temporal-spatial situation, these and similar questions should make sense.

The Left as a whole should also make some revisions to some of its traditional positions, including its hostility to liberalism. Traditionally, the Left has seen liberalism as a purely bourgeois ideology serving only the interests of the bourgeoisie, not realizing that, as Edward Bernstein had rightly said, "there is actually no really liberal conception that does not also belong to the elements of the ideas of socialism."[11] For the section of the Left that dreamed (and still dreams) of moving immediately toward establishing a socialist state through a proletarian revolution with the sole support of the proletariat, there is no doubt that liberalism has nothing to offer. But for those who believe that establishing a socialist state is a gradual, lengthy, and democratic process that needs the support of a vast number of people from different classes and strata, liberalism has much to offer the process. Fred Halliday is right in arguing that "the contraposition of liberalism and socialism, a product of the First World War, was across the world one of the most costly sectarian legacies of the Leninist period, and one which in many countries, from Germany to Iran, cost the opposition movements dear."[12]

Another area that needs revision is how the Left deals with religion. In the past it was possible to ignore religion and religious forces, but after decades of Islamic rule and its interwoven webs that permeate the whole of Iranian society, politics, and culture, it is not possible to do so now. The secular Left, in its confrontations with Islamic fundamentalists, needs the support of rational secular religious elements and should be able to count on these forces as allies. The support of independent, moderate, and secular Muslim thinkers should be distinguished from the support given by part of the Left to the Islamists or Islamic reformers within the regime. In those cases, the section of the Left that supported Khomeini and Khatami

11. Edward Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Critique and Affirmation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 142.

12. Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Left in International Perspective," in Cronin, *Reformers and Revolutionaries*, 34–35.

compromised its secular principles and by doing so made one of its biggest political and ideological mistakes. How right was Gilbert Achcar when he pointed out that the socialists "can play down their atheism, but never their secularism."[13] In a democratic society, religion cannot just be pushed to the "private domain" and its existence in the "public sphere" denied. The public sphere should be the domain of competition of all views and ideologies. The main issue is to prevent religion from creeping into public policy and state affairs. The moderate religious elements that believe in secularism and have no agenda to form a religious state can play a very important role in this regard.

Iran at present is under a fascistic, clerical-military oligarchy with a unique, interwoven network of repressive, ideological, and economic apparatuses of control. While the majority of Iranians are fed up with three decades of repression, corruption, and social and cultural degradation, the regime, through its impressive apparatuses, still maintains the backing of millions of people whose survival is linked to the country's massive network of bureaucracy, military, militia, religious foundations (*bonyad*s), and multifunctional mosques. The Left, much weaker now than it was during the time of the revolution, cannot challenge this regime by itself; it needs allies from among non-lefts, both liberal nationalists and independent secular Muslim reformers. The workers' movement, despite its heroic resistance and periodic, sporadic strikes and confrontations with the regime, cannot grow without the existence of genuine autonomous trade unions. The women's movement, equally heroic and even more widespread than the workers' movement, despite its incredible achievements in challenging the regime, will not be able to succeed without the establishment of democracy. Nor will the youth and student movements and movements of national minorities.

13. Gilbert Achcar, *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror* (New York: Monthly Review, 2003), 59.