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Notes on the Iranian left: lessons from the past

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In the recent period revolutionary movements have grown and surfaced across the world. The events in the Arab world have shown how strong these movements are, indeed they have succeeded in toppling tyrannical regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet what all these movements have lacked is a genuine revolutionary leadership, and this serves as a barrier to genuine socialist revolution. In no country does this apply more so than in Iran.

There, today, the Green Movement continues with its weak “leadership”, embodied in Mousavi and Karroubi, who are holding back the movement with reformist illusions. This has been the case throughout modern Iranian history. Even though the Shah was dethroned in the revolution of 1979, due to the lack of revolutionary leadership a political vacuum was created and subsequently filled by the Shia fundamentalism of Khomeini and the clergy. Thus the revolution was derailed and counter-revolution succeeded.

This article is to be considered more as notes on the Iranian left, rather than a detailed analysis of every single left group in Iran. The article points out the mistakes of the groups of the Iranian Left in the past, so that they may not be repeated in the building of a genuine revolutionary leadership that is able to facilitate the establishment of a socialist state under the full control of the workers.

Four groups are examined: the Tudeh Party, the Fedayeen, the Mojahedin, and the League of Iranian Communists. Some of the same mistakes were shared by all, especially impatience, which lead to sectarianism, i.e. of placing themselves outside the mass movement. Additionally, there were some faults that were unique to single groups.

All of these, however, can be attributed to one fundamental problem: a lack of correct theory. Theory is at the heart of any successful revolutionary party that must be the property of all its cadres who spread the ideas of Marxism. With correct theory, the mistakes made by leftist groups in the past are less likely to happen again in the future.

The Tudeh Party

The Tudeh Party was created in 1941 and was quickly established as the largest communist party in Iran. Police reports reveal that by 1945 it had 2,200 active members, “tens of thousands of sympathisers in its youth and women's organisations, and hundreds of thousands of sympathizers in its labour and craft unions”. Its main newspaper had a circulation of 100,000 (at a time of great illiteracy); the *New York Times* even went as far as to estimate that it and its allies could muster about 40% of the vote. After an assassination attempt on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1949, the party was outlawed and repressed, but it is testimony to its size and credibility among the masses, that it was still able to mobilise large numbers of people. It is undeniable that for a long time the Tudeh was the party of the workers.

However, the Tudeh served as a satellite party of the Soviet Union, and from this derived several faults in its theory. Its failure to understand the nature of mass movements manifested itself in outright sectarianism. As early as 1951, the party ignored the mass nationalist movement led by the then Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. Despite the fact that millions participated in this movement, the Tudeh initially branded Mossadeq a mere ‘agent of American imperialism’ and refused to participate in the movement. Even when the party did come to support the movement around Mossadeq, this was with reluctance, exemplified by the fact that it completely demobilised when it came to know of the CIA’s plans of a coup d’etat to replace Mossadeq with a puppet Prime Minister, thus facilitating the imperialists in reasserting their hegemony and the Shah’s brutal crackdown on the Left in the years that followed. Of course, Mossadeq was a liberal nationalist, but as Marxists, we should not ignore the movement he represented! We should support any genuine mass opposition movement, and not position ourselves outside of it, at the same time pointing out that true freedom cannot be attained under the capitalist system. As Lenin pointed out:

“If you want to help the 'masses' and win the sympathy and support of the 'masses', you should not fear difficulties, or pinpricks, chicanery, insults and persecution from the 'leaders' (who, being opportunists and social-chauvinists, are in most cases directly or indirectly connected with the bourgeoisie and the police), but must absolutely *work wherever the masses are to be found.*(V.Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: an Infantile Disorder*)

A sectarian attitude has resurfaced with the current revolution in Iran, with some seeing the Green Movement as essentially bourgeois. The movements represented by Mousavi and Mossadeq share many similarities, and so any group that holds a similar view to the one the Tudeh previously held is doomed to repeat the same mistakes.

The party’s connection to the Soviet Union meant that it believed in the Stalinist and Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution. This holds that a bourgeois democratic revolution is needed so that conditions can later arise which are appropriate for a socialist revolution. As the party’s 15th plenum reveals:

“At this stage, the necessary condition for revolutionary development in Iran is the overthrow of the old monarchist regime, to break down the reactionary machinery of the government, to end the rule of the big capitalists and landowners and transfer power from these classes to the

national and democratic classes and strata, to the workers, peasants, petit bourgeoisie, patriotic intellectuals and also the national bourgeois strata, in other words the establishment of the national and democratic republic...”

Such a view led the Tudeh to refuse to take the leadership of the revolutionary movement in 1978-9, and moreover, to the party encouraging the petit-bourgeoisie and clergy to fill the political vacuum. A clear case of this can be seen in its actions towards the workers’ committees in existence throughout the country, the Shoras. These councils should have served as the main organs of a democratic workers’ state, much like the Soviets in the Russian revolution. Instead, the Tudeh did not seek to connect them in a national network, choosing to convert them into trade unions. Consequently, they lacked the means by which to take power and were confined to addressing localised industrial disputes, which served as a major defeat given that it came during a revolutionary situation. Incidentally, the greatest indictment of the Tudeh was that it did not declare a revolutionary situation until mid-January, *after* a general strike had taken place in the autumn of 1978!

The party leadership’s two stage theory of revolution led it to actively seek an alliance with Khomeini against others on the Left. In the immediate months and years after the revolution, the party condemned anyone that opposed Khomeini and the theocracy as a ‘counter-revolutionary’ and an ‘imperialist’. The party was loyal to the Ayatollah to such an extent that it supported the government’s brutal crackdown on other leftists, particularly those in the Mojahedin and the Minority Fedayeen. That the Tudeh headquarters were bombed by ultra-left terrorists in 1981 reflects the severity of its betrayal against the Iranian Left. In return for this loyalty the Tudeh were hoping for security from the government, in the hope that this would provide the party with legitimacy to grow and be in a position to lead during the “socialist stage” of revolution in the distant future. However, the theocracy “rewarded” the Tudeh by outlawing it in 1983 and thousands of its members and associates were imprisoned or executed.

As Marxists, we vehemently oppose imperialism. However we must understand what imperialism truly is to avoid it blurring our vision. Imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism. We must not compromise and create alliances with others who claim to be anti-imperialists but who have fundamentally different views on capitalism. Imperialism has a class basis, and any alliances or connections that are made, at a national or international level, in the form of a United Front, must be on the terms of class unity against capitalism. Khomeini was in no way a genuine anti-imperialist; in fact he defended the capitalist system and had spent much time in a comfortable existence in France, but many rank and file members of the Tudeh were consciously misled by the party leadership into thinking he was, and subsequently into supporting him. If one is genuinely anti-imperialist one cannot enter into such an alliance!

The Fedayeen was created in 1971 by a union of different groups, some of whom had previously been in the Tudeh. It was anti-Stalinist from the outset, critical of the Tudeh’s dependence on the Soviet Union. It based itself on Latin American revolutionary

organisations of the time, and as its full name ‘Organisation of Iranian People’s Fedayeen Guerrillas’ reveals, guerrilla warfare dominated its strategy.

However, it is clear that the Fedayeen came to fetishise guerrilla-ism as the only means of struggle that could bring about change, to such an extent that claims were made within the party that the guerrilla should control the party, not the party control the guerrilla. This mentality arose from impatience with the lull in resistance against the Shah, leading the Fedayeen leadership to believe that the masses were apathetic to politics. As one its theoretical leaders, Pouyan, wrote in 1970:

“Experience has shown us that the workers, even young workers, despite all the dissatisfaction they feel about their situation, still show little sympathy for any political learnings.” (A.P. Pouyan, *A Biography*, 3rd edition, 1972)

The Fedayeen believed that they could simply push the masses into carrying out an uprising through the actions of a handful of people. As another leader, Ahmadzadeh, said:

“couldn’t we be convinced that bringing about conditions for the formation of the party and conditions of joining the real struggle lie within armed struggle itself?... Why should we believe in the dogma that a massive uprising could only be initiated by the masses themselves?” (M. Ahmadzadeh, *Tahlili az Jameye Iran*).

What these leaders forgot is that the conditions for ‘the real struggle’ are objective, not subjective; the masses will move when, and only when, they are ready! The same applies to those sectarians in Britain who believe that they can spark workers into activity through direct action. Of course, we do not oppose guerrilla-ism per se, any more than we do occupations or protests; all are forms of struggle and an expression of resistance. However, guerrilla-ism cannot be artificially imposed on any given situation; it can only emerge as a genuine expression of the mass movement if the objective conditions exist, in the same way that a general strike can only take place when the masses are ready to move, and its limitations should be pointed. It cannot be imposed by the revolutionary party. It serves as one means of resistance during times of specific conditions. As Lenin said:

the party of the proletariat can never regard guerrilla warfare as the only, or even as the chief, method of struggle; it means that this method must be subordinated to other methods, that it must be commensurate with the chief methods of warfare, and must be ennobled by the enlightening and organising influence of socialism.” (Lenin, *Guerilla Warfare*, 1906)

Guerrilla warfare adopted outside of these conditions does not link to the class struggle. Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, it seems the case that the Fedayeen never attracted mass support from the working class. When it perhaps did, in the early 1980s, this was only because of the treacherous betrayal of the Tudeh. It has been estimated that of the 172 Fedayeen members that died because of terrorist activities during 1977-78 (such as the bombing of banks, Western corporations’ headquarters, and the assassination of governmental officials), 74 were college or senior secondary school students, 17 were

teachers, 19 engineers, 5 conscripts, and only 12 workers! As the social scientist Sepehr Zabih argued:

“Why should workers who were successfully unionised under the Tudeh Party between 1941 and 1953 accept the leadership of a young, inexperienced Marxist group whose only claim to fame was waging often suicidal guerrilla warfare against a well-entrenched enemy?” (S. Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran*, 1986, p. 132)

Guerrilla-ism in this form becomes mere sectarianism, acting outside the mass movement. In the case of the Fedayeen, it was, quite simply, nothing but Narodnik-like terrorism.

In 1980-1 the Fedayeen split into two main groups – the Fedayeen Majority and the Fedayeen Minority – mainly over the question of guerrilla warfare. The Majority rightly pointed to the limitations of guerrilla-ism whilst the Minority continued its fetish. However, unfortunately the Majority allied with the Tudeh in supporting Khomeini, seeing the Ayatollah as defending Iran from imperialism represented in the Western-backed Saddam Hussein. That such a large split should create two organisations with wholly divergent theories shows how poorly members were educated. It is a priority of the revolutionary party to consolidate theory among its members to create cadres; failure to achieve this was the root of almost all the problems the Tudeh and Fedayeen experienced.

The People’s Mojahedin of Iran

The People’s Mojahedin of Iran was formed in 1965 by “Islamic Marxists” involved in the National Front of Mohammad Mossadeq. It espoused a theory of ‘revolutionary Shiaism’, holding that Marxism and Islam are compatible and share a common enemy in the form of imperialism. As a 1975 Mojahedin publication states:

“The Shah is terrified of revolutionary Islam. The regime is trying to place a wedge between Muslims and Marxists. In our view there is only one major enemy – imperialism and its local collaborators. When SAVAK shoots, it kills both Muslims and Marxists. Consequently, in the present situation there is organic unity between Muslim revolutionaries and Marxist revolutionaries. In truth, why do we respect Marxism? Of course, Marxism and Islam are not identical. Nevertheless, Islam is definitely closer to Marxism than to Pahlavism. Islam and Marxism teach the same lessons for they fight against injustice. Islam and Marxism contain the same message, for they inspire martyrdom, struggle, and self-sacrifice. Who is closer to Islam – the Vietnamese who fight against American imperialism or the Shah who helps Zionism? Since Islam fights oppression, it will work with Marxism, which also fights oppression. They have a common enemy, i.e., the reactionary imperialist.” (*Pasokh be Etahamate Akhire Regime*, 1975)

It is too simplistic to claim that such an attitude made allegiance to the clergy and Khomeini during the revolution inevitable. The relationship between Marxism and Islam was an issue of constant debate within the organisation, and it seems the case that by the time of the revolution, the dominant trend was leaning more towards Marxism. That Khomeini oppressed the Mojahedin almost immediately, long before the Tudeh, suggests this was the case.

However, such an understanding of Marxism certainly made it possible to believe that the values of Shia fundamentalism were common with their own, and that collaboration with the clergy during the revolution would be fruitful. As has already been stated, the revolutionary organisation must not compromise its theory; the conception of imperialism held by the Mojahedin led it into the same trap as the Tudeh and the Majority Fedayeen. In the case of the Mojahedin, this anti-imperialism came as a result of its incorrect conception that Marxism had a similarity to Islam.

The Mojahedin was also guilty of fetishising guerrilla-ism to such an extent that is assumed a terrorist form. The organisation carried out several terrorist attacks throughout the 1970s, mostly targeting American officials and representatives, a clear sign that its anti-imperialism came to dominate its theory. Its support for the taking of hostages from the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, and its later criticism of Khomeini for releasing the hostages, best exemplifies this. By attacking imperialism first and foremost, the Mojahedin failed to connect their activities to the social conditions in Iran, and were thus unable to take any form of leadership of the working class during the revolution.

The Union of Iranian Communists

The League/Union of Iranian Communists was created in 1975-6 but was much smaller than other groups in the Left. Frustration with the outcome of the revolution manifested itself in the organisation's decision to organise an uprising in the city of Amol in January 1982, believing, just as the Fedayeen had, that it could cause the masses to start a mass insurrection.

The uprising was a clear disaster, highlighting several of the major problems with guerrilla warfare. Because the organisation was so small, the response by the government meant that most of its members and leaders were imprisoned or executed, completely decimating it and jeopardising its future. Guerrilla warfare also entails the participation of cadres in armed combat, risking that many of them will be destroyed and lost to the cause. It is far more fruitful that these cadres concentrate their efforts on spreading the ideas of Marxism among the workers and youth and thereby build the core of what can become a mass working class, urban based party. When the objective conditions are appropriate for guerrilla warfare, it may become necessary for cadres to engage in such conflicts, but the Amol uprising did not come at such a time, instead it was imposed on the masses in a sectarian manner from outside. Consequently, it did not beget renewed struggle on the part of the masses.

One final point worth considering is that guerrilla warfare can in certain circumstances serve as a hindrance to the revolutionary movement. Instead of becoming a beacon which the masses can follow it falls to the level of individual terrorism, which can actually alienate the masses, and also provides the state with the excuses it needs to step up repression and introduce even more draconian laws with which to then beat the mass movement. In the case of the Amol uprising the Revolutionary Guard was called in to quash it, which was undertaken without any hesitation. Guerrilla warfare at a time when the objective conditions are not right has the potential to create another effect, alienating the ordinary rank and file members of the armed forces by pitting them against revolutionaries in a survival-of-the-

fittest situation. It is a tactic that should arise organically, not one that is imposed on the masses by a small organisation like the League of Iranian Communists.

Conclusions

A key lesson to be learnt from this is to be patient. It is crucial to understand that the masses will only move when they are ready, and cannot be prompted by those outside the mass movement to rise up into action. As Marxists, we must work within the mass movement. Sectarianism, which has manifested itself in the form of guerrilla-ism quite often in Iran, cannot achieve any significant degree of success.

Additionally, it is vital to stay true to our ideas. We must not compromise our position to such an extent that we accept ideas contradictory to those of Marxism. If we form alliances with other groups, they must be fundamentally based on a common class interest. Anti-imperialism can encompass groups with wholly divergent values, and we must be cautious when joining with others attaching themselves to this banner.

What is incredible about all the different groups analysed is that they all proclaimed to be Marxist-Leninist. That their policies and actions should be so divergent from the writings of Marx and Lenin demonstrates how incapable they all proved to be in understanding theory. For a revolutionary organisation this is fatal. The greatest lesson to be learnt from the demise of groups on the Iranian Left is that theory must be taught correctly in the revolutionary organisation, and must be used to consolidate members into cadres capable of spreading the genuine ideas of Marxism, so that socialist revolution may become possible!