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The Opening in Iran

Ken Knabb

12 March 1979

The uprising in Iran is the most beautiful event since the Hungarian revolution of 1956. It has shaken all the ruling powers of the world and exposed their collusion. The Arab regimes are as alarmed as Israel. The Chinese bureaucracy was caught with its pants down: it supported the Shah and denounced his opposition (thus continuing the policy of Mao and Chou, who praised him for his “anti-imperialism”). As for the Russian bureaucracy, far from “stirring up trouble” in Iran, it has always aimed at maintaining a stable, highly policed regime there, as elsewhere on its borders, so as to prevent any contagion of rebellion from spreading to its own people. It has sold arms to the Shah and turned fugitive Iranian radicals over to SAVAK. Only when his downfall seemed likely did it cautiously begin hedging its bets. The saber rattling between Russia and the U.S. was strictly for the benefit of the spectators. American ambassador William Sullivan admitted: “We ran Laos, but in Iran, which is tremendously important to us, there’s not much we, or anyone else, can do. Ironically all the major powers — the U.S., Britain, France, China and the Soviet Union — are alarmed by what’s going on in Iran.” (*New York Times*, 13 November 1978.)

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The possibility that the mass insurgence might overflow bureaucratic or priestly mediation — this is what lies behind all the powers' horror of “chaos” or a “power vacuum” in Iran. The Iranian movement is not essentially a religious one; the partial margin of immunity granted religious expression simply provided an opening and a rallying point for it. Women who previously wore the veil as a symbol of defiance to the Shah are now defying Khomeini by refusing to wear it; his emissaries have had to report to him that the oil workers “do not respect religion”; and the momentum and contagion of the movement has already pushed even many of the religious to go beyond his dictates. The destruction of banks, stores and cinemas is not a reaction against “modernization” or “Westernization,” it is the same kind of reaction against *alienation* that is found in modern revolts in the West, from Watts to Gdansk.

The clergy, the bourgeoisie and the army all had, and still have, obvious contradictions with each other. But none could do without the other two. In spite of his intransigent rhetoric, Khomeini was negotiating behind the scenes and, like the National Front, had long taken care to keep the army as intact as possible, warning his followers against provoking it. Finally radical elements initiated the final battle without him and forced his hand. The army, on the verge of breaking up, had to give in to his government as the last hope for stemming the popular insurgence.

As in Portugal in the wake of the fall of the fascist regime, the political untenability of outside intervention plus the weakness and contradictions of the internal ruling forces in Iran may for a while leave spaces for partially free social experimentation. The strikers who have gone back to work only on their own terms; the people who have taken over and run their own towns, “answering only to themselves” — these represent potential dual-power situations that have not been brought completely under control. In spite of Khomeini's appeals, hundreds of thousands of arms seized by guerrilla groups or distributed

among the people have not yet been turned in. And the autonomist movements of the Kurds, the Baluchis and the Azerbaijanians are seizing their opportunity and may spread the insurrection to the already crisis-ridden bordering countries where overlapping sectors of those peoples live.

The rulers and commentators pretend to see in any radical action the work of communists or other leftists. In reality the Iranian “communist” party — the Tudeh Party — has long been discredited for its reformism and servility to Russian foreign policy. Though virtually wiped out by the Shah’s police, it has nevertheless praised his “revolution from above” while denouncing the mass uprisings of 1963 and 1978. Recently it has called for a coalition government to work for the “normalization of the economy” and “put an end to the present crisis as quickly as possible.”

As for the guerrilla groups and militant students, though largely disillusioned with the various “communist” regimes, they imitate the hierarchical organization and manipulative practice that led to those state-capitalist bureaucracies. Sixty years of Leninist-Stalinist counterrevolution have taught them nothing. They add to the ideological pollution with their wooden language and lower the consciousness of the “hard-working, patriotic workers” (who are thus applauded precisely for their alienation) with their chorus of “correct leadership,” “progressive clergy,” “people’s army,” “workers’ states,” and other such self-contradictions. But who struggles for the real power of the soviets?

A “popular” government cannot defend the revolution because it has to defend itself from the revolution. But once it has disarmed and demoralized the people, who can defend it from the reaction? Mossadeq set the stage for the CIA coup by using the army against strikers and demonstrators; Ben Bella set the stage for Boumédiène, who destroyed the pockets of self-management in Algeria; Allende (with the support of Castro) set the stage for Pinochet by attacking the workers and

peasants who had armed themselves and seized factories and land.

The fundamental question in Iran is not which combination of forces will hold the state, but whether the workers will affirm themselves autonomously against it. If they don't speak for themselves the bureaucrats will speak for them. If they don't communicate their experiences and analyses (by seizing printing equipment or radio stations, for example) the mass media will continue to block out or falsify them. The only way to defend the revolution is to *extend* it. Even if it is defeated there will be that much more to undo. A reformist or bureaucratic movement will scarcely interest workers who already live in reformist or bureaucratic societies. Only a movement that strikes radically at the global system will strike a chord among them, win their support in resisting intervention, and inspire them to parallel revolt. "The next revolutions can find aid in the world only by attacking the world in its totality" (Situationist International).

Each time people begin to make their own history they re-discover the highest moments of the repressed attempts of the past. A revolt like that in Iran is an opening, it cuts through the organized confusion and enforced passivity and poses questions in concrete terms. It's the social moment of truth.