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## **Support Democracy and Human Rights in Iran**



## **Free Political Prisoners in Iran!**

**EDITORIAL****'RUNNING ON EMPTY': A REGIME IN CRISIS**

**A**s this issue of *Iran Today* goes to print it is absolutely clear that the Ahmadinejad government in Iran has pressed the 'self-destruct' button. More than two years into its stolen second term, its time is running out. The Green Movement leaders, Mousavi and Karroubi, even though under house-arrest since March 2011, continue to influence the millions of Green Movement supporters. Mass opposition is rising like a tide. It has gone from strength to strength since June 2009, when the regime ignored the general election outcome and imposed its own candidate.

The regime's policies have bankrupted the economy, devastated communities and impoverished ordinary people in cities, towns and rural areas alike. The government is devoid of ideas for solving the chaos they have created. They resort to ever increasing levels of cruelty and violent suppression to keep the opposition at bay. Amnesty International has recently launched a global campaign on Iranian independent unions' struggle for basic human rights.

For Ahmadinejad and his supporters there is nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. Their attempt to follow IMF prescriptions has created serious economic and social crisis in the country. The abolition of subsidies on fuel and other basic necessities has impoverished the population and destroyed home markets. Imports have flooded in, wrecking home industries and throwing countless thousands into unemployment, while a minority have profited from the rich pickings.

The people of Iran know that the government has no legitimacy. In response to their increasing protests the regime has answered with a reign of terror. This has included a sharp rise in executions, 500 since the beginning of the year, with political opponents falsely accused of drug trafficking, rape and other trumped up charges. Many executions are staged in public, as macabre medieval spectacles. Recent horrific video footage showed prisoners sitting on a bus roof strung up to the parapet of a bridge above. At the appointed time the bus drove off



at speed from under them, leaving them to hang below the archway.

The brutality of the regime is epitomised by the murder of women's rights activist, renowned Quranic scholar and political prisoner, Haleh Sahabi. She was murdered while on temporary release from jail to attend her father's funeral. In July, 19 political prisoners went on hunger strike against the maltreatment and murder of political detainees. The hunger strikers include a former deputy foreign minister, a student leader and internationally known journalists. One of the protesters, Hoda Saber, died on the ninth day of hunger strike. His death was not from lack of food. He suffered a massive heart attack as prison officers ignored his screams for help.

Trades union action opposing both the regime's economic policies and its suppression of workers' organisations has significantly increased, with many workers openly demonstrating and taking strike action. Locally-based protests against sackings, non-payment of wages and non-recognition of democratic structures in workplaces are also common. The regime's reaction is nothing short of ruthless, with scores of trades unionists incarcerated, tortured and executed. Waves of arrests followed the peaceful May Day workers' celebrations.

With half of the population of Iran aged less than 30, the regime is particularly concerned about the disenchantment of youth and students. Its fears are well-founded. To delay the entry into the labour market of thousands of young people each year, the regime has opened up higher education institutions in every small town. Now several million very aware and highly educated youngsters are being flung unceremoniously from university to the dole-queue.

The articles in this issue of *Iran Today* show that the regime has plunged Iran into a deep economic, political and social crisis. It is a failed and internationally isolated theocracy that cannot last much longer. However, these articles also bear testimony to the fact that the people of Iran have 'a world to gain'. They increasingly sense the opportunity and are prepared to take the risk, to see the back of the Ahmadinejad government and the dawn of a more just, democratic and peaceful future. Now, as never before, world public opinion must stand in solidarity with all progressive and democratic forces in Iran. International solidarity right now will make a very real difference. We know it, let's show it!

## UNISON resolves to continue fight for democracy and human rights in Iran



On 22<sup>nd</sup> June this year UNISON's national delegate conference voted to continue campaigning for the release of imprisoned Iranian trades unionists.

Trades union activists from different regions welcomed the news of the recent release of Mansour Osanloo, the leader of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, after four years in prison. However, they called

for continued campaigning until all detained trades unionists are released. Ivy Carlier, for the water, environment and transport group, stressed that Osanloo's release was only a conditional release. She added that his colleagues, Reza Shahabi and Ebrahim Maddadi, remain in custody. Mr Shahabi's lawyer has said that the prosecution is seeking to bring a fresh charge of "enmity against God", which carries the death penalty. Delegates also asked the NEC to consider honorary membership for Mr Osanloo.

UNISON has consistently opposed the violation of trades union rights in Iran and campaigned in solidarity with Iranian workers fighting for their fundamental right to freedom of association and the right to organise. It has campaigned for the release of Mansour Osanloo and other trades union activists and leaders. It has lodged protests with the Iranian Ambassador to London.

In its letter last year to the Ambassador of Iran, Rasoul Movahedian, UNISON demanded the release of Osanloo and also called for his family and reliable representatives to be allowed to visit him, after worrying reports emerged of his deteriorating health.

On the news of Osanloo's release from prison in early June this year Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary, said: "Trade unionists across the world will today be celebrating the release of Mansour Osanloo, after four years in an Iranian jail. It has taken four long years but this is the justice that we have all, including Mansour's family, been waiting for. Our hope is that his hard-won freedom will not be threatened again. He

**Free All  
Political Prisoners  
in Iran**



must not be re-arrested.

"Our struggle for trades unionists jailed across the world for the so-called crime of being in a trades union goes on. Two of Mansour's colleagues are still in captivity and our fight for their freedom and the liberty of all our brothers and sisters across the world will go on. "The principle of allowing workers to form a trades union is a basic human right, and is the cornerstone of a strong, fair and civilised society. These rights would be of benefit to Iran and to many other countries across the world, who regularly persecute trades unionists. We urge these governments to come into the light and allow workers' rights to be respected."

UNISON's National Executive Council was urged to support the call for the immediate release of all political prisoners and a total end to executions; support progressive campaigns for peace, democracy, human rights and social justice in all the countries of the Middle East, including Iran.

In a wide-ranging debate on the Middle East and North Africa, delegates hailed the revolutionary movements in the region as "inspirational" and pledged support for the peoples there.

## Our Priority is to Maintain Maximum Solidarity with the Iranian People

*As the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of CODIR approaches, Iran Today speaks with Noel Harris, the veteran progressive trades unionist who has led the work of CODIR as General Secretary. Noel is a former National Secretary of ASTMS in Ireland, an executive committee member of the ICTU and Honorary Secretary of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement. He was Head of the Social and Economic Department of WFTU, a National Organiser of ACTT and as a leading left trade unionist in the UK has followed closely the developments in Iran. He is optimistic about the effectiveness of CODIR's international solidarity movement with the Iranian people. Iran Today invited Noel Harris to respond to a number of questions about CODIR, its origins, its objectives and its position in the wider movement for peace, human rights and democracy in Iran.*



**Iran Today:** Tell us about the history of CODIR and what prompted the founders of CODIR to launch this campaign.

**Noel Harris:** CODIR was established in the early 1980s at a time when there was a lot of confusion about the nature of developments in Iran after the 1979 revolution and the overthrow of the Shah's dictatorship. It was set up specifically to provide truthful information about the realities of life in Iran and because there were concerns about the direction and policies of the religious forces that had taken over the control of the state after the revolution.

These forces were not interested in the development of the revolution beyond the very first stage of getting rid of the shah's regime. In addition, they were displaying serious anti-democratic tendencies. The main slogans of the 1979 revolution were for democracy, human rights and social justice. Those controlling the regime however, were not demonstrating any interest in human and democratic rights. The forces favouring an outdated type of capitalism were gaining control of the regime. The main aim of those involved in establishing CODIR from the beginning has been to offer solidarity to the people of Iran in their struggle for democracy and human and democratic rights.

**Iran Today:** What were the original goals and activities of CODIR and how has it evolved since then, particularly in the past 6 years or so when the repression has escalated in Iran?

**Noel Harris:** CODIR has consistently argued for democratisation in Iran and for progressive policies there. Our work has been doubly difficult as we have also consistently mobilised public opinion against any foreign interventions in Iranian internal developments. We have worked hard to expose the reactionary nature of the regime ruling Iran and have argued against western governments trading the human rights of the Iranian people with lucrative contracts and commercial deals. CODIR became involved in the international campaign against the continuation of the fratricidal Iran- Iraq war during 1980- 1988. We

have argued that there is a direct link between the theocratic regime's inhumane policies against the people of Iran and its adventurous and irresponsible foreign policy. In fact it could be argued that the regime in Iran favours conflicts, tension and crises. It provokes crises and uses them to its own advantage, to extend its oppressive practices and to control society.

I have to admit that the regime's policies in essence have changed little. Since 2005, and the election of Ahmadinejad, we are witnessing an upsurge in the use of terror against people internally while the regime is engaged in a war of words with the US administration and the European Union.

The regime exploits the situation and argues that because of the external threats no dissent can be allowed. CODIR is against the threats of war and economic sanctions against Iran, but it is also against the provocative and reactionary positions taken by the theocratic regime.

CODIR's campaigns are aimed at exposing the violations of human and democratic rights in Iran. In particular we oppose the regime's use of brute force to suppress the women's, youth and trades union movements in Iran.

**Iran Today:** Who are the main backers and affiliates of, and contributors to CODIR's work internationally?

**Noel Harris:** CODIR's work was initially based in the UK and naturally we sought support from progressive individuals and organisations in the UK. We have secured the support of significant sections of the trades union and labour movement in Britain and many have backed our positions. A number of national trades unions and scores of trades councils have affiliated. A number of MPs and MEPs are also supporters of our campaigns. This year UNISON adopted a policy that focuses on the support for human and dem-

ocratic rights, including trades union rights in Iran. A number of progressive MEPs across Europe support CODIR's campaigns. We have important supporters in the peace and democratic forces in all English speaking countries in Europe and the North America.

**Iran Today:** Tell us about some of campaigns that CODIR has successfully launched in the past.

**Noel Harris:** In recent years CODIR has positively contributed to the better understanding of the nature of the Iranian regime and the character of its conflicts with the USA. We have warned against those sections of the left and progressive forces that used the simplistic approach of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". We have said that it will be disastrous to give any legitimacy to the theocratic dictatorial regime in Iran purely because it is in conflict with the USA. We have proved through well argued campaigns that the regime in Iran is following bankrupt economic and social policies.

Our campaign involves people who think in a variety of different ways. While some of what we say could be relevant for a communist or a socialist involved in party politics, some people do not support class politics and do not belong to any political party. In a solidarity campaign we need everyone who is prepared to do their bit to contribute to promote our aims. We simply fight for peace, democracy, human rights and social justice. Within the UK we have also approached the Liberal Democrats, as they have many members who have been active in international solidarity campaigns. We need everyone with a commitment to democracy to show solidarity with the people of Iran and support our campaign. We make a broad appeal to all who support democracy and human rights in Iran.

**Iran Today:** As you are aware, Iranian reformist parties, the Participation Front for example, have appealed to the progressive forces around the world to campaign for the freedom of the popular movement, and in particular Mr. Mousavi and Karrubi. Has CODIR any contact with the Iranian reformist activists outside of Iran in general and, in particular, those campaigning for freedom for the prominent figures of the Green Movement?

**Noel Harris:** As a solidarity organisation it is not our task to endorse any political party inside or outside Iran. However, insofar as the suppression of the Green Movement and the arrest of the presidential candidates is a violation of their legitimate right to protest, we will campaign for them to be allowed this freedom. In the same way we would argue the case against the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in Iran without necessarily taking a position in relation to their beliefs.

**Iran Today:** Has CODIR been in contact with Iranian progressive dissidents or organisations outside of Iran to collaborate with the struggle of the Iranian people for their rights, democracy and social justice?

**Noel Harris:** It is natural that any solidarity organisation campaigning internationally will come into contact with individuals and organisations that may have the same concerns. CODIR is no exception. In this regard we follow the same approach that the Anti Apartheid Movement followed during 1980's and 90's. We welcome support from all progressive and like minded organisations provided they come with no strings attached. We have had support from individuals and followers of a number of Iranian progres-

sive organisations. However we have made clear that CODIR will not cooperate or accept support, in any form, financial or practical, from individuals and organisations supporting the return of the monarchy, or those advocating violence or foreign domination of Iran.

**Iran Today:** How about collaboration and joint action with other human rights and progressive activists and forces in other countries?

**Noel Harris:** Since its inception CODIR has worked closely with Amnesty International, international organisations representing progressive lawyers, journalists and trades unions. We are working closely with forces advocating world peace, democracy and human rights globally. The labour and trades union movement has a prominent role within the forces that we work closely with in different countries. CODIR has naturally worked closely with women's, youth and trades union organisations in different countries with the aim of promoting a better understanding of the political realities of Iran.

**Iran Today:** How effective do you think the international campaign against repression is in helping the people inside Iran with their struggle?

**Noel Harris:** We think that the campaign against repression in Iran has been very successful. It is true that the people of Iran still suffer from the policies and actions of the regime in Tehran. However, it is also the fact that the Iranian theocratic regime is isolated internationally, to a large extent due to this campaign. We believe that the regime has been forced to retreat on a number of occasions. For example the case of Mansour Osanloo, the Iranian trades union leader, or Sakineh Ashtiani, the woman sentenced to death by stoning, are two recent examples.

CODIR representatives have been invited to make representations about different aspects of development in Iran to a number of international bodies. Although the regime pretends that it is not concerned about these campaigns, it has nevertheless shown that it is not indifferent to them. We believe this work needs to be expanded, coordinated and better targeted.

**Iran Today:** What future plans does CODIR have to improve its campaign for the rights of the Iranian people?

**Noel Harris:** We really hope that the current movement for progressive change in Iran is successful soon so that our current campaigns become redundant!! However CODIR is planning to expand its operations, in both the scope and effectiveness of its campaigning in these critical moments. Our plan is to significantly improve the reach of our campaign. CODIR hopes to expand its work to a number of non-English speaking countries in Europe including Belgium, France, Holland and Germany. It is essential that in the coming months the struggle of the Iranian people for peace, democracy and social justice is backed up and supported by a genuine international campaign of solidarity. We in CODIR believe that after the momentous changes in Egypt and Tunisia earlier this year, it is now the turn of Iran. We work to that agenda.

## Power Struggle at the Heart of the Theocratic Regime!

**With less than two years to go before the next presidential election in Iran the power struggle to determine its outcome is in full swing. Jane Green considers the implications for the Iranian people and the consequences for peace in the region.**

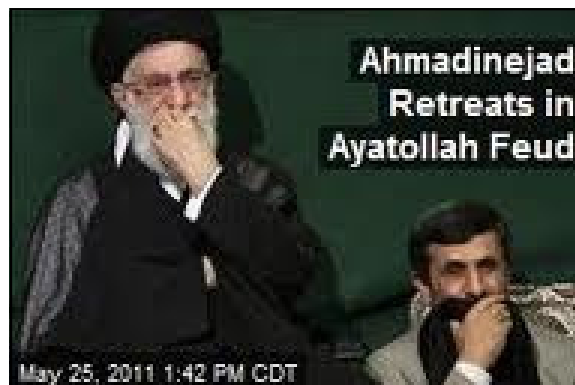
Uncertainty and instability are not usually associated with autocratic regimes such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 2009 presidential election, which saw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reinstated for a second term, changed all of that as thousands of Iranians poured onto the streets in protest at an election result which was widely seen as being rigged.

For the clergy and the revolutionary guards, the real power in Iran, Ahmadinejad was seen as a safe pair of hands. Having tolerated eight years of the reform minded president Khatami from 1997 – 2005, the hard line taken by Ahmadinejad in his first term was enough to satisfy the clerics that a further four years was necessary, whichever way the Iranian people actually chose to vote.

Opposition candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi subsequently suffered threats and harassment. They are now effectively under indefinite house arrest. Their supporters in the Green Movement, along with others in the political opposition and trades union movement, have been subject to regular violence, imprisonment and, in some cases, execution.

Yet two years into Ahmadinejad's second term all is not well. In April the president disappeared from office for a full 11 days after his decision to sack intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi was overturned by Ayatollah Khamenei. Having sacked the Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, in December last year, in spite of Mottaki being a favourite of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad thought that he had a free hand in re-shaping his government.

Of course there can be no such freedom under the Iranian system where the Supreme Leader has the final veto. The extent of presidential power is still reliant on the support of the religious zealots at the heart of



Iran's power structures. Undeterred, Ahmadinejad recently attempted to streamline his Cabinet with the merger of eight ministries into four. The move was formally blocked by Khamenei, assisted by parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad has sacked three ministers and taken temporary control of the oil ministry.

Needless to say this move has been unpopular in the Iranian parliament and has put Ahmadinejad on a collision course with both the parliament and the religious establishment. The dispute has reached the point where Ayatollah Khamenei has appointed a mediator, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahrudi, to resolve the dispute between the president and parliament. Shahrudi will chair a five member panel made up of hardliners known for their opposition to any reforms within the ruling system.

As Ahmadinejad is unable to stand again it is widely believed that his preferred successor is his current chief of staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. However, Mashaei is deeply unpopular with the religious establishment because of his views on the importance of promoting pre-Islamic Persian history as part of the culture of Iran, suggesting that the country should be an 'Iranian republic' rather than an 'Islamic Republic'.

Such talk is seen as the precursor to reducing the role of the clergy in the constitution to a largely symbolic one, with increased powers for the presidency. While on the surface Mashaei's position has the



vener of modernity he is nevertheless a deeply conservative politician. His current positioning is widely seen as an attempt to woo those disaffected by the outcome of the 2009 election, by positioning himself as a modernising voice within the Iranian system.

Whether Mashaei gets to test his views with the voters remains to be seen however. In recent weeks at least 25 people close to the president and Mashaei have been arrested by the security forces and are facing charges ranging from revolutionary 'deviancy' to espionage. More recently it has appeared that current parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, may be positioning himself as the hardline candidate. In relation to the recent dispute between the president and parliament Larijani has backed the role of Ayotollah Khamenei in settling any differences stating,

"We at the Majlis (Parliament) sometimes pass something but when we realise that the leader has a different view, then we change our position. I think this is one of the positive aspects of the Majlis, in that when it understands the views of the leader, it acts on it."

This sounds very much like Larijani offering himself as the safe pair of hands the Ayotollahs will be looking for in 2013.

While the struggle for position in the 2013 presidential race goes on, the Iranian people are already the losers before the official campaign begins. Flying in the face of reality president Ahmadinejad praised Iran's economic development in a speech on the 28th February in which he asserted that,

"Iran is one of the few countries in the world where no one goes to sleep hungry." However, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Iran report (Dec 2010) high inflation will be a factor in Iran's economy for the next four years. The current inflation rate is 15% which Ahmadinejad has responded to by keeping the exchange rate artificially high. The outcome of this strategy is that the price of foreign goods remains more stable than those produced in Iran, meaning

that Iranian produced goods remain on the shelves. The reality has been that the doubling of the price of bread and the quadrupling of gas prices, has pushed many ordinary Iranians further in to poverty and, in spite of Ahmadinejad's pronouncements, hunger.

The instability of the next two years is not likely to help Iran's position on the international stage. The threat of external attack, whether from the US or Israel is never far away. There has already been speculation that an Israeli attack on Iran could happen before the September meeting of the UN Security Council, which is scheduled to discuss the issue of Palestinian statehood.

While political moves are played out in Iran's ruling circles the economy continues to be in freefall, the international position of the country is uncertain and the lives of the Iranian people are a daily struggle against unemployment and inflation. The removal of subsidies on fuel, food and other daily essentials has led to recent unrest with labour protests over delayed salary payments and rising unemployment. This is where the hope for the Iranian people lies, in their own hands. Action by the people in Egypt and Tunisia is showing what is possible. Iran's leaders are well aware that, for all their manoeuvring, the people may yet decide the election outcomes in ways that may not be to the liking of the establishment.

## Withdrawal of Subsidies in Iran

In May 2010, Iran's parliament ratified its so-called 'great economic surgery', which Ahmadinejad's administration had been preparing since the June 2009 election as a major pillar of its "privatization" plan. At its heart was the now infamous 'targeted subsidies' section. For 'targeted' we must read 'eliminated'. The 'surgery' was implemented in November 2010, setting off, predictably, a catastrophic chain reaction throughout the Iranian economy and society, as government subsidies were withdrawn from items such as fuel, grain and other basic necessities of life.

The idea of opening publicly controlled sections of the economy to private investment and the market, shrinking the government and leaving it with an only arms-length association with the socio-economic life of the society and leaving matters to private investors and the free flow of capital and goods, and so on...are not new concepts in under-developed and developing countries in the era of globalization. Neither is the claim new that this is all being introduced to improve the living standard of ordinary people. But, as seen in many countries and particularly those under dictatorial rule, including Iran, the result has been a devastation of the economy and an ever-widening gulf between the rich and poor, while the government pockets huge sums of money by not paying subsidies.

One of the first actions of the Ahmadinejad government in its second term in office in 2009 was to introduce the elimination of the subsidies on fuel and to 'replace' them with cash payments to families to supposedly 'compensate' them for the removal of the subsidy. As a result, not only did prices then increase abruptly, but also the functioning of various sectors of the home economy was adversely affected, e.g. in industry, agriculture and the service sector.

One of the first 'aftershocks' was a 400% rise in utility bills in the new year. Fearing popular discontent and the potential reaction of working people to this price hike, the government rushed to deposit another installment of cash subsidies into the bank accounts of registered families. The government also announced "plans" to control and curb the price rises by threatening producers. A chain reaction was now setting in. Not long after the government announcement of the removal of subsidies, the prices of wheat and bread went up. This caused a 25% increase in food prices. Thus, the purchasing power of the ordinary people was immediately drastically reduced. The government's only response was to demand that people "accept reasonable price increases". Even worse, wages and salaries were frozen, the minimum wage was set at a level that did not begin to take into account inflation, currently running at 60% and people's job security in all sectors of the economy was put at risk.

The elimination of subsidies pushed the price of fuel and other commodities up beyond even their level in world markets. For example, the price of petrol is now higher than the price of F.O.B Persian Gulf. Similarly, the price of electricity is almost 50% higher than the global price. And, although prices are being adjusted to bring them in line with global markets, salaries and wages are being paid at the same domestic rate. The steep increase in the price of fuel has severely impacted on domestic industry and the manufacturing sector, and the selling price of domestically produced copper, steel, aluminum and

petrochemical products has risen to between 20% and 50% above world market levels. This is damaging the competitiveness and export potential of domestic producers, including state-owned enterprises such as steel mills. This has led to increased import activity, with importers needing increased levels of foreign currency with which to trade. This is driving up the exchange rate and weakening the national currency even more. In short, this parasitic sector is accumulating a fortune through importing all kinds of goods from across the world and selling them in the domestic market, which is suffering from shortage of domestic products.

This dire situation of industrial manufacturers and domestic capital, arising directly from the elimination of subsidies, has forced many producers into bankruptcy. This in turn has increased unemployment. There have been massive lay-offs, while new jobs have not been created to replace those that have been lost. According to the latest figures from the UN's Human Development Index 2010, the unemployment rate in Iran is 33%, with around 40% of people "working" in the black market and non-productive, temporary and low-skill jobs. Young people entering the labour market are particularly badly affected. No wonder that the Iranian government refuses to release the unemployment figures and simply states that it will solve the unemployment problem in the next three years! In addition, not only are wages not increased to match inflation, but labour laws are being revised to "legalize" the changes in favour of the employers, and prevent working people from defending their rights to associate, organize and strike.

The agricultural sector of Iran is another victim of the heavy blow of subsidy removal. It has been reported that with the implementation of the "great surgery", \$15 billion of extra costs will be imposed on the agricultural sector and it will lose its competitive edge. This will further deepen poverty in the rural areas of Iran, where people mostly work on small plots of land and can in no way compete with the lower prices of imports. Thus, lack of macro-economic planning and the negative impact of economic policies such as the elimination of subsidies on items like fuel, is devastating the already struggling agricultural sector of Iran and forcing thousands of villagers to migrate to the cities in a desperate search for work and a way out of grinding poverty.

Working people, in rural and urban areas, both in manufacturing and service sectors (teachers, public employees, small shop-keepers, etc), whether in the public or private sector, are all suffering from the withdrawal of subsidies by the government in its bid to establish the so called "free market" economy in Iran. This is at a time when ordinary people are denied legitimate means to defend their rights and the labour laws are being 'revised'. The fact that the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, named this year 'The Year of Economic Jihad,' points to the grim socio-economic situation of the country. The attempts of the Iranian regime to curb and suppress the discontent of the people, and the labour movement in particular, in reaction to this situation must be seen in this context.

## Iranian Youth in the Struggle for a Brighter Future!



Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Iranian youth and university students have always been an active contingent of the country's movement for democratic change and opposition to dictatorship. In recent years the role played by the youth in opposing the theocratic regime has been no different. To survey the opinion and demands of Iranian youth, Iran Today recently interviewed Amir Rashidi, a democratic youth activist and university graduate.

Amir was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1982 and studied Software Engineering at university. He is a human rights activist and is involved in the campaign for women's rights. He joined the One Million Signature campaign that demands change to all discriminatory laws. He is also a member of the Alumni Organisation of Iran (Consolidation of Unity), one of the founders of the Free My Family campaign and was active in the protest movement against the regime manipulation of the outcome of the presidential elections in June 2009.

Amir is currently cooperating with the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt.

**IT:** *The events in Iran in recent years, especially since the disputed presidential elections, have made headline news in world media. What is the attitude of the youth to this popular movement?*

**AR:** The protest movement following the June 2009 disputed election was indeed the first nationwide and general protest experience of the Iranian youth. Although there were other protests before this period, they were not widespread or extensive in volume. I think that the socio-political climate, created in the country during the presidential election campaign, encouraged the youth to become more active in the protest movement. The regime was actually completely shocked. After so many years, the youth were shouting their demands with a loud voice and without fear. I remember that even before the elections, in a

demonstration that I was one of the organisers of, for the first time after almost thirty years people in the streets of Tehran were chanting "Iranian women should be free to choose to wear the veil or not!" All the participants in this demonstration were young people who were experiencing their first protest action.

**IT:** *Over the last century, Iran's youth and university students have taken centre stage in movements against the ruling authorities. Why, and how, have the youth acquired such a significant role in the people's movement for change in Iran?*

**AR:** To answer your question, I must admit that in Iranian society university students enjoy special respect. When I myself entered university, I became much more respected in the area where I lived, at work and within my family. For this reason, the analysis and views of university students are important to the people and receive attention. This is one of the reasons that the government tries to ascribe the student protests to non-students.

There is an interesting poem that concisely explains how this exceptional status has been achieved. It reads like this: 'To make Iran the home of the noble people, we have suffered a lot of pain.'

This status is the result of many struggles and the suffering of hardship for many years. Many of our beloved have been killed or are imprisoned at present. For instance, student leaders such as Bahareh Hedayat, Ali Malihi, Zia Nabavi and Abdullah Momeni have been put on trial again for exposing the use of torture inside the prisons.

**IT:** *Despite the regime's brutal repression, it seems that the country's youth and women are intent on continuing their active protests. What are their demands? What do the youth want?*

**AR:** Today, the demands of the youth, women or men, are summarised in words such as democ-

racy, freedom and equality. They wish to live in a free and equal society, beside one-another. Like people all over the world, they want to be happy and enjoy their lives. Today, you are not able to observe any level of freedom in the people's lives. Fear of detention and torture exists in the society; yet all people struggle to achieve freedom and equality and pay the price.

**IT:** *What are the main restrictions that a young person suffers in today's Iran?*

**AR:** In a single expression: lack of freedom. This does not only mean political freedom though political freedom is a part of it. Today in Iran we witness gender discrimination in the universities. Female students do not have the right to choose their own field of study. Workers do not have peace of mind, neither do teachers. For example; as a sacked teacher, one of the criticisms of the authorities was why I didn't attend the collective prayer sessions or why did I wear jeans.

Freedom of dress is very important; however, it does not exist. Simply, the demand is for freedom; political, religious, academic and social freedom.

**IT:** *In reality, what are the prospects for an average youngster in Iranian society at present?*

**AR:** To tell you the truth, the prospects are not very bright. Unemployment, discrimination, intimidation, oppression and the bleak outlook for the country and communities living there are the only prospects. Youth are facing a very tough and sensitive life. However, I believe this can't go on forever. The youth are taking the challenge. They are involved in the struggle for change. With international solidarity they can succeed. I am confident. I don't doubt this even for one second.

**IT:** *There have been scores of prominent Iranian student leaders, past and present, imprisoned and put under pressure. What is their situation at present?*

**AR:** Unfortunately they are under a great deal of pressure. Abdullah Momeni, one of the most prominent student activists, was put on trail again because of his writing of a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei. Officials of the Ministry of Intelligence have told him that he did not have the right to write about the tortures he suffered in an open letter and, essentially, that he does not actually have the right to write a letter at all to the Supreme Leader.

Bahareh Hedayat has received only one

week of temporary leave from the prison, in order to undergo surgery, and we are quite concerned about the continuation of her treatment when she returns to prison after her leave.

After two years of detention, Dr. Zeidabadi, a prominent leader of the University Graduates Organisation, has only received two days of temporary leave from prison. Student organisations have almost been destroyed and rebuilding these organisations is one of the most urgent tasks and essential necessities.

**IT:** *What is the situation of the families and relatives of the imprisoned student activists?*

**AR:** Families of these activists are under pressure as well. These pressures are mainly financial or arising from government restrictions. Because the government obstructs their income sources, they usually face severe financial difficulties. In the case of Abdullah Momeni, two months after his arrest his salary was stopped without explanation. He was a teacher and has three children. In some cases, even members of the families of these activists have been denied the right to study in universities or get jobs in the public sector.

**IT:** *What importance do you attach to the international public opinion and international solidarity with the protest movement in Iran?*

**AR:** How world public opinion assesses the developments in Iran and adopts positions in relation to them is vitally important. We need to help to develop a vibrant movement of international solidarity with the student, labour and women movements in Iran. We need to learn from each other's experiences. Unfortunately, the world does not have a clear understanding of the situation in Iran. And this is the one of the main obstacles for organising international solidarity with the current protest movement in Iran. This short period of my living abroad has been an excellent opportunity to become familiar with European culture. We need exchanges in knowledge and culture, the phenomenon that the Iranian government is fearful of and which it refers to as 'the cultural offensive'. No, I don't believe this is an offensive. This is a cultural exchange for advancing both cultures. I must say, together with those who support the movement of the Iranian people, we will certainly prevail. We are confident of a better future.

## 'A Separation'

Directed by Asghar Farhadi

Reviewed by: Linda Sherwood

In recent years Iranian film directors have often sought to avoid the harsh censorship of the regime by using allegorical themes in their films. Kiarostami's excellent *Shirin* in which women's faces are filmed as they react to a traditional Iranian story is a good example but the new generation of directors is seeking to show the world how life in modern Iran really is - often at great cost to themselves.

Jafar Panahi is still threatened with prison and has shown great courage by continuing to film (his documentary *This is not a Film* was filmed in secret and shown at Cannes). Asghar Farhadi too has spoken out and paid the price: filming of *A Separation* was halted because of administrative problems after Farhadi had openly supported exiled Iranian directors. Farhadi spoke out again this year at the Berlin Festival where he was awarded the Golden Bear for *A Separation*.

The separation of the title is between Simin (played by Leila Hatami), an English teacher, and her husband Nader (Peyman Moaadi) a banker, a seemingly enlightened middle class couple with an 11-year old daughter Termeh (Sarina Farhadi). Simin wants to leave Iran for Canada but Nader, having first agreed to go with her now refuses because he has to look after his ageing father who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Simin asks for a divorce which is refused by a judge whom we do not see but whose words are symptomatic of the attitude of the regime towards women who are seeking their independence. Simin returns to parents' home leaving her daughter with Nader who must then engage a carer for his father. Their fairly comfortable middle class world is turned upside down by the arrival of Razieh (Sareh Bayat), pious woman from a poor family who, unknown to Nader, is pregnant.

Razieh's desperate situation is evident from the outset: she has to get up at 5 to take a bus with her small daughter, leaving her out-of-work husband Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini) at home. The perverse influence of the mollahs is revealed when she has to phone to ask whether she is allowed to wash her male patient. Razieh constantly draws her chador about her while Simin wears a loose scarf and western-influenced. Despite her willingness to do a difficult job for very little pay Razieh receives no respect from Nader; this is in contrast to the respect accorded to the teacher who gives Termeh private tuition.

Through Razieh's daily routine we have a glimpse of the reality of life for the poor in



Tehran today: a chaotic mixture of tradition, religion and western influence with little possibility of getting out of the vicious circle created by a lack of money and the insidious influence of religion. Simin's situation too is desperate; having to leave her daughter and unable to communicate with Nader her frustration increases. Termeh is obliged to observe the scenario played out by the adults and, in the end, to carry a weight too heavy for her young shoulders.

What the two women have in common are the constraints placed on their lives by their respective partners who are unable to deal with the constraints (Nader's father, Hodjat's creditors) placed on them. The men with their monstrous egos are unwilling to assume responsibility for themselves and as a result of this egoism Nader's father (magnificently played by Ali-Asghar Shahbazi) is tragically dehumanised and Hodjat becomes mentally unbalanced. When Razieh loses her baby the situation of all the characters takes a tragic turn often verging on the farcical. The inflexibility of Iranian bureaucracy whether it be the police, the judiciary or the health service appears almost surreal. In spite of this, the women appear ready to reach a compromise in order to solve the families' problems but the men stubbornly resist.

*A Separation* is a powerful film. Farhadi crams it full of the injustices that Iranians experience all the time but a less intricate storyline might have left us feeling more sympathy for the characters. As it is, although certain aspects of their plight may arouse our sympathy, they all have an unsympathetic side which makes empathising with them more difficult.

The title of the film in Farsee is *The Separation of Nader and Simin*. The broader title adopted for the western cinema is telling: the separation is not just between a couple but between women and men, rich and poor, religious and unbeliever but also between the norms of Iranian society and those of western culture.

## CODIR Joins the International Campaign



CODIR has joined the international campaign for an end to the illegal detention of the well known personalities leading the popular protest movement in Iran. The campaign works for the release of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi from house arrest. As an initial step of this campaign, a petition has been launched which will be addressed to the UN Secretary-General, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran.

### PETITION

It has been more than six months since the abduction and illegal imprisonment of Iran's former presidential election candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and their spouses Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi. These individuals were forcibly imprisoned in their own homes by security forces and plain clothes agents, after calling upon the nation of Iran to participate in public rallies on February 14th, 2011, in support of the democratic movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Furthermore, since their illegal arrest, with the exception of a small number of highly restricted contacts with their family members, the aforementioned persons have been completely isolated and banned from all communication with the outside world.

During this period, not a single individual associated with the Iranian State, judiciary or security forces, has accepted responsibility for these transgressions and violations of the law. Moreover, no arrest warrants, summons or any charges have been issued by the judicial authorities against the above mentioned individuals.

Furthermore, the recent reports by the families of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnavard regarding their grim physical condition, coupled with the ruling government's refusal to grant them access to reliable medical care and trusted physicians of their choice, has only further increased the concerns regarding their physical and psychological well being.

Given the past history of repeated and systematic arrest and torture of political prisoners at the hands of the Iranian State and judicial authorities, and the repeated past violations of basic prisoner rights, there is increased fear that such violations are similarly occurring against Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and their spouses and that their well being, both physical and psychological, is further threatened and rendered vulnerable. It is worth mentioning that only a short while ago in June, Hoda Saber, a political prisoner at Evin prison, lost his life as a result of similar beatings and abuses at the hands of prison authorities and their negligence in providing timely access to adequate medical treatment.

We the undersigned wish to bring attention to the fact that the behaviour of Iranian State and judicial authorities vis-a-vis the aforementioned four individuals is in violation of basic human rights, international law, as well as national laws in the country, including article 32 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution, article 583 of the Islamic Penal Code, article 9 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons Against Enforced Disappearance. We also respectfully request that in order to protect the

rights of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi, you utilize every international, legal and diplomatic means at your disposal, to ensure that the Iranian government upholds its commitments vis-a-vis the nation of Iran and the international community. We ask in particular, that you demand the following actions from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

\* To expedite the immediate and unconditional release of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi;

\* To guarantee the physical and emotional well being of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi and their family members under all circumstances and conditions;

\* To launch an immediate, accurate, complete and impartial judicial investigation into the identification of those responsible for the kidnapping and forced imprisonment of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi, including the public prosecution and sentencing of such criminals in compliance with the Iranian and internationally recognized laws;

\* To uphold the individual rights of Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, Zahra Rahnavard and Fatemeh Karroubi, including but not limited to such rights as access to defence lawyers of their choice, access to adequate medical care and trusted physicians for the performance of any and all necessary medical examinations.

We thank you in advance for your immediate attention and action in resolving this dire and inhumane situation, and greatly appreciate any and all humanitarian efforts in this regard.

### AFFILIATE TO CODIR

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