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An Interview Discussing the Pandemic, Economic Crisis, Repression, and Resistance in Iran

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This interview started as a conversation between a few comrades. What was originally intended as a conversation over the course of a few weeks became three months of stealing time in order to scramble to write down some thoughts while confronting state repression at the hands of the Iranian regime. Despite this delay, this interview's main purpose has remained unchanged since the outset: to educate and update comrades in the global North on the current state of affairs in Iran, the years of struggle from 2015-2018 that culminated in a nationwide strike wave, how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected social movements, the ongoing effects of austerity measures and international sanctions, and the government's response to both protest and increased geopolitical tensions ever since the United States withdrew its support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (i.e., the "Iran Nuclear Deal") in May 2018.

The identities of the two comrades will remain anonymous in light of the threat of repression at the hands of the Iranian government.

Here in the US, media coverage has been dominated by two events: the COVID-19 global pandemic and the recent anti-police uprising that broke out in response to the police killing of George Floyd on May 25. Considering that the US media provides little information regarding the day-to-day lives of Iranians and the cycle of struggles that have spread across the country in the recent years, it is safe to say that the American public and US leftists are largely in the dark as to what it means to live and struggle in Iran today. Could you begin by educating us on the composition and various currents within the Iranian left as it currently exists? How have various groups and organizations responded to the compounding effects of the economic, political, and epidemiological crises?

J: Let me begin by commenting on your initial point, which is true of course. The suffering of daily life in Iran is underrepresented,

there is no space for keeping one's hands "clean" anymore, there is nothing outside of neoliberal "integrated world capitalism," to borrow a term from Antonio Negri and Félix Guattari. There is nonetheless *hope for a hope*: hope for a coming struggle that opens the space for hope.

J-P: So far, we have been the No Future generation of Iranian leftists, both in Iran and abroad. For sure, many generations think of themselves as "No Future." but I am not referring to general tendencies or abstract concepts. When you realize that your immediate history excludes any desirable future, you gradually learn to develop your roots in the present. You are forced to reject any mediatory stage, and only think of the best next step. Paradoxically, you will learn to live as if the future is unwritten; a situation similar to the slogan "Be realistic—demand the impossible."

Yet the potential of an unwritten future is projected on the present as a struggle for survival; we cannot survive without immediately and radically changing our conditions. That is why we need to develop our own politics of survival, new lines of alliance, new forms of self-organization and collective self-care. It seems boring, and far from the revolutionary self-conception of many Iranian leftists—especially those living abroad. But only then can the Iranian left translate its current potential into a concrete alternative—and its alternative would be widely accepted by the society, while the opposing forces would be incapable of terrorizing it.

not only in the US media, but in all the international media that has been hooked on Iranian news of secret explosions, nuclear controversies, military tensions with the US and its allies, etc. The grand politics is blind to that suffering; so is the mainstream media. And the situation has only gotten worse in recent months. The national currency is devaluing as fast as the cost of the essential goods and services are rising. Unemployment is widespread. The rate of suicides has increased. There is a shortage of medicine for different chronic illnesses. Housing prices have skyrocketed. People in big cities, especially Tehran, have resorted to tragically "innovative" solutions for housing: living in temporary tents, living in basic shelter-like structures, renting the rooftops of other houses and apartments and setting up their tents there, living in their personal cars... According to official statistics, at least one third of the urban population is living in slums.

Now, let me come back to your question. To talk about leftist organizations in a "common sense" meaning is hard in the context of Iran. The Islamic Republic considers any sustainable oppositional collectivity a threat. Even if you are organized for watching movies, reading books, etc., there is a fair chance of being called for interrogation. Still, in such an atmosphere, we have seen a multiplication of efforts in organization among factory workers, teachers, nurses, truck drivers, railway workers, and other so-called essential workers. Moreover, the leftist student movement has reorganized itself in recent years and also created the most viral slogans of the recent protests. There is a women's movement involving a wide range of political positions that has been suppressed heavily as it has asserted itself more forcefully in recent years. If we focus on a generic term like "leftist politics" in Iran, considering leftist here as inspired by various Marxist traditions, then we can point out four trends: syndicalism, left nationalism, anti-neoliberalism, and anti-imperialism. It is not the best categorization in many senses and there are intersections between these trends, but as I'll explain further, it will serve our purpose to map the leftist politics in Iran.

There are two trends of syndicalism among organized labor in Iran. Haft-Tappeh Sugar Cane Factory Workers Independent Syndicate is one notable example. The workers of Haft Tappeh industrial complex in the south of Iran, Khuzestan province, have organized themselves autonomously and fought a hard battle in recent years, with all their main organizers arrested and some forced to confess on national TV. Forced televised confessions have long served as a strategy of suppression in the Islamic Republic. However, their struggle against the privatization of the company and the corruption of the owners, managers, and officials still continues to this day. They have called for workers' management of the factory and its resources. They also exemplify a grassroots, non-hierarchical, and autonomous organization. They elect the representatives of the syndicate, but the representatives do not decide on behalf of the workers and all the decisions regarding the management and owners' propositions in negotiations with them are put before a form of worker's general assembly to be discussed and accepted or rejected. Haft Tappeh syndicate is the embodiment of a syndicalism that is local and remains local, with an insistence of local, autonomous workers management.

Another form of syndicalism is exemplified by the Free Trade Union of Iran. The leaders of this worker's union have also all been arrested and prosecuted. They call for a countrywide union and independent organization of workers in each local context, but they have a more top-down organizational structure and do not focus primarily on local context.

Left nationalism has also its different trends. Some are the heirs to the communist party line in the beginning of 1980s, ideologically close to the Soviets, but also supporting the Islamic Republic government (which intersects here with what I mentioned as anti-imperialism). These leftists focus on "national security" and "national interests" and defending the national integrity in the sense of borders. A part of them have problems with minorities' movements, such as Kurds or Arabs, and sometimes brand them as

Venezuela and also its influence in the Shia community in Brazil and to a lesser extent, in Argentina. The right-wing populism of Ahmadinejad and the left-wing populism of Chavez are wielded together through their anti-Imperialist, anti-American discourse. And now, as you mentioned, both countries are under US sanctions and benefit from an alliance together.

J-P: It is misleading to compare America's presence throughout Latin America with the presence of Iran. But looking at the history of interactions between Latin American countries and their anti-imperialist allies (Cuba and the Soviet Union is an exemplary case), one could not identify a strategic alliance between Latin American populist governments and Iran. There has been no organic growth in the relationship even between Iran and Venezuela, and it is unlikely to occur due to the essential differences between the two parties. On the other hand, reducing the interactions to a set of measures alleviating the effects caused by US sanctions is also wrong. The significance of the international persona of the Iranian government exceeds these measures of mutual interest. Iran can only maintain the class oppression and domestic suppression by relying on the false anti-imperialist persona it presents on the global stage. On the other end, Venezuela, lacking a genuine ally, consents to this image of an international alliance which mainly serves to excuse its domestic problems.

What does the future look like for Iranian leftists within Iran as well as for those living abroad, as political exiles or otherwise?

J: I can only answer this question from a more personal perspective. So let me quote Kafka here: "*Es gibt unendlich viel Hoffnung, nur nicht für uns.*" ("There is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us.") I think there is no hope for something. Any "something" that has come forth has also conditioned the hope, solidified it into an actuality that ought to be surpassed. I have come to believe that hopelessness in this meaning—affirming the disaster we are living through—may as well be the first step towards a radical politics:

tion. The government's international legitimacy strongly depends on promoting this false persona, and the progressive forces around the globe usually do not care enough to examine the details, preferring to embrace an easy ally against the imperial power of the US.

This persona has a domestic projection, which I mentioned earlier as "the axis of resistance," a current of workerist orthodox Marxists, who enjoy the freedom of speech and political practice (which is their unalienable basic right, of course, but their being granted it stands in stark contrast to all other leftist and progressive currents here). They are fearless fighters against an abstract conception of neoliberalism and imperialism, while remaining silent about the concrete measures of neoliberal policies inside Iran. Furthermore, they approve and promote the imperialistic interventions of Iran in the surrounding region, on the grounds that this means resisting the bigger imperialist. This complex propaganda machinery has compromised the solidarity our society would otherwise feel for oppressed people around the world. Nationalists take advantage of the situation by promoting slogans such as "Leave Gaza alone, think about our own people"—and the left finds it hard to take a genuine stand among these propaganda machines.

For those of us in the US, America's imperial presence throughout Latin America is a well-known fact. Iran's presence in the region, however, gets less attention in the media. In light of General Salami's recent remarks, defending Iran's shipment of petrol commodities to Venezuela and celebrating the two countries' continued alliance, how should we interpret Iran's presence in Latin America? Would you say that it is part of a larger geopolitical strategy, or does this alliance between Venezuela and Iran come down to the simple fact that both countries have a mutual interest in alleviating the effects caused by US sanctions?

J: I don't have a comprehensive knowledge regarding this matter and I have not done much research on it. However, Iran has a presence in Latin America through its relations with Cuba and

"separatists." Another part in the opposition would even work with right-wing opposition parties or royalists in order to form a "national" coalition against the Islamic Republic.

Anti-imperialism has been on the rise in recent years, in light of the tensions with the US and the probability of a war. But the anti-imperialist left now has two distinct lines: one that is defined solely by its anti-imperialism and one that has anti-imperialism as part of its discourse. While both are largely theoretical currents, the latter is mostly a form of contemporary critical theory and the former is a return of the mainstream communist discourse of the 1970s and '80s, which would make a coalition with the Islamic Republic against American imperialism. Those anti-imperialists now defend the Islamic Republic and its interventions in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere. Not unlike the "official" communist party in Syria itself, which first backed Assad's brutal performativization of endo-colonialism [colonization of the interior of the country] and counterrevolution and lost many of their members to the waves of revolution. The ultra right-wing opposition, chiefly composed of royalists supporting the Trump administration and being supported by it, showcases this current of Iranian leftism in their propagandas to demonize the left as a whole.

Anti-neoliberalism is an umbrella term for another heterogeneous trend of leftist thought in Iran: from student activists who clearly call their struggle "against neoliberalism" and show solidarity with similar movements against neoliberal economic policies and governmentality in France and Lebanon and Chile, to fractions of the syndicalist left, to other groups and circles who mostly work in the field of contemporary theory, critical theory, and political economy.

There are other forces that cannot be captured in my schematization of the Iranian left—the different forces among minority militants: Kurds, Arabs, Balochis, etc. We should also consider that there is a divide between a left more prone to action/praxis and a left more inclined to theory/writing (sometimes dubbed "cultural"

Marxists¹). Another divide comes about from the general perspective of these political positions regarding the question of the state: is retaking power and reimagining the state's functionality necessary for an emancipatory politics or should any emancipatory political movement go beyond the question of the state and its hierarchical organization? There is also a general divide on this issue between the leftists inside Iran and outside Iran.

Now, there are instances of solidarity among some of these trends. One example was a statement that many leftists, from different political positions and standpoints, signed after the coronavirus crisis, calling for a redistribution of wealth, universal healthcare, freedom for political prisoners as well as other prisoners accused of non-violent crimes, social housing, special attention to slums, and so on.

With a few individual exceptions, all the forces on the left oppose the US sanctions and its policy of regime change in Iran. Not because those forces do not want to topple down the theocratic regime, but because the American government has shown its support for the most neoliberal, right-wing, nationalist forces in the opposition and after all, no good comes of neo-colonial foreign interventions—as in the cases of West Asia and North Africa, for example.

J-P: Of course, it is comprehensible that the media pay so much attention to significant events such as the pandemic or the anti-racist protests across the US. The problem, though, lies with the approach and their representation of these events. I believe you

¹ With respect to the term “cultural Marxist,” it is important to note here the differences in connotation and meaning between the ways that the term is used in the United States and how it is used in Iran. While in the United States, the expression evokes the conspiratorial myth of the ascendancy of a shadow Judeo-Bolshevism behind liberal democratic governments, seeking to render impure the white, European, race; in Iran, “cultural Marxist” is a pejorative term used to describe radical academics who are more comfortable as “public intellectuals” and invest more time in speaking engagements and the written text than in the practical exigencies of concrete struggles on the ground.

with organizations fighting for the cause of Palestine. Now, for a part of the people, supporting Palestine means supporting the Islamic Republic, as Tehran has financially supported Hezbollah, Lebanon, and Hamas after the revolution.

J-P: Methods of policing, control, and repression are increasingly circulating among the ruling classes of the globe, just as protest tactics and news of uprisings are circulating and people are inspired and encouraged by other protests worldwide. I would venture to say that this twofold acceleration has certain connections with the ever-increasing flow of capital in the time of neoliberalism. But examining the responses of the Iranian government reveals a very crucial issue. Pro-government forces lit candles in the memory of George Floyd, while a few months back, lighting a candle for the victims of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 was punished with up to five years of imprisonment. The pro-government media covered all the protests after the death of George Floyd, and they underlined the unjust and illegal killing of a citizen—while a few months back, in November 2019, the security forces killed thousands of protesters and even arrested the families who wanted to hold funerals for their loved ones.

I don't intend to make oversimplified comparisons, but the international image of the Iranian government is deeply distorted, and the international left and progressive forces are partly responsible for that. The government has created a false anti-imperialist persona for itself, which is uncritically embraced by progressives who oppose the imperialist power of the US. I recall that part of our intellectuals are disappointed with a credible icon such as David Harvey, not because of his theory, but because he participated in an official conference which implicitly confirmed the anti-imperialist stand of the Iranian government. A similar story played out when Angela Davis signed a petition confirming this narrative about the government while people were being butchered on the streets. Of course, Angela Davis was so experienced in the intersections of various oppressions that she soon withdrew her name from the pe-

ing and a bloodbath in which protesters were killed. The upcoming presidential elections will probably announce the indisputable annulment of any reference to the ballot box.

As for the response of the left, I should remark that the terms parliamentary and extra-parliamentary do not apply to the Iranian left, since they are not recognized under any circumstances and since 1983 all left organizations have been considered illegal. But looking back at the December-January 2017 uprising, protestors forged a slogan that articulates the left's stand on this issue: "Reformists and hardliners, your show is over!" This slogan, which became widely popular, indicated that the people are disinterested in the internal conflicts of the ruling elite. Of course, these conflicts, time and again, provide an opportunity for a political outlet of the people, but neither of the two factions represents the people's interest.

Over the past few months, images and articles have made the connection between policing here in the United States, in Hong Kong, and in Palestine. Has the news of the anti-police uprising here in the States encouraged or informed the strategy of the left, as it currently exists, in Iran? How has the Iranian government responded to, or reported on, the ongoing uprising here?

J: Iran's Radio and Television is under the exclusive control of the Supreme Leader and they always broadcast any kind of crisis, protest, and scandal in the US. The left were inspired to point out the same discrimination against Afghan immigrants in Iran and supported their "Afghan lives matter," but this did not go beyond social media hashtags. The communication between the protest movements in the US and the Iranian left has been mostly an emotional one, not a transmission of tactics or strategies. The same goes for the protest movement in Hong Kong.

Palestine, however, is different. Traditionally, it holds a special status among the Iranian left. Many left guerrilla fighters against the Shah's dictatorship were trained by the Palestinians or worked

know well that the revolution will not be televised, not in the US, and certainly not in the Middle East. But that is not the issue here.

The reason you feel that you are left in the dark and need educating on this matter, is partly due to the incoherent situation of various currents within the Iranian left. This dispersed condition could be considered as a strategy for survival, since any sort of articulation or mediation between these currents is interrupted by all means necessary. But it also presents an obstacle that the Iranian left has to overcome if it wants to make any sort of concrete change. Moreover, this situation implies that we too share the necessity of educating ourselves on this issue, and we are seeking answers to similar questions. Most importantly, this diffused condition makes it impossible to claim a true image of all the currents within the left, since each component will know better about their immediate field of action, and may neglect some other components. So, instead of making a detailed list, we need to start from the whole picture of the Iranian left. There is a huge gap between what the Iranian left actually is today, and the promising potential it bears for a radical change in the region.

If you look at the actual position of the left today, you will recognize various intellectual and discursive improvements concerning issues such as gender, precarity, minorities, etc. But this has no actual effect on the outcome of so many crucial issues, from the coronavirus to sanctions, from the suppression of minorities to traditionally left issues such as minimum wage. There is no need to mention that we live and struggle in an overdetermined situation with so many domestic and foreign agents who, despite their divergent and differing interests, are ultimately integrated in their opposition to the left. So, it is inevitable that the left, lacking a sustainable organization or a tangible program, does not play a dominant role in immediate matters. But looking at the course of events, and in light of the multiple and compounding effects of different crises—from political legitimacy, to satisfying basic needs, from social issues to natural disasters such as earthquakes—and waking up to

a new crisis every day, you will realize that none of those agents can present a coherent response to all these matters. The left, on the other hand, despite its organizational incoherency, is creating a discourse that could address our social, political, and cultural problems alike. This is the reason why our government is promoting a counterfeit leftist image of itself, commonly referred to as the “axis of resistance.” But that is such an important issue that we will discuss it separately.

As for the composition and currents within the Iranian left, and as ill-fitting as it may seem, the categories that the government uses to classify these currents could be a revealing starting point about the dynamics within them. Not long ago, the intelligence services had three categories for all leftist activists. First, what they called the “workers’ left,” apparently referring to leftist currents among workers; then there was the “Marxist Left,” which mainly referred to organized activists usually associated with leftist parties; and finally, there was the “cultural left” sometimes referred to as the “new left,” which were the intellectuals, usually based in bigger cities, sometimes having connections with other components of civil movements. They had a clear conception of the potentials of these categories—and, of course, of how to suppress each of them.

But since 2017, a change in the internal dynamics of these categories, combined with an increasing popularity of the left among other activists and progressive forces, has rendered this conception obsolete. Since then, the so-called cultural left has taken an active part in workers’ demonstrations, the so-called Marxist left has adopted new approaches towards “unorganized” masses, and the workers’ left is waging a new level of struggle relying on their comrades outside the workplace. Hence, the composition of the Iranian left is a work in progress, and it has yet so many new meanings to unfold. What can be said for certain is the old (self-) conception is irrelevant to the new path that the left has been making since 2017. Today, one can observe a strong leftist current in most of

lated in another duality, reformists versus conservatives (or principalists). The past differences between left and right in terms of economic policies are no longer a dividing issue here, as many reformists and conservatives are now advocates of the free market, globalized trade, and privatization.

J-P: The elections in Iran have always been systematically unfair. In this context, only national elections (such as presidential elections) could make a slight difference. These elections used to be a medium to solve or postpone internal disagreements and contradictions within the ruling class by referring the matter to the public (usually mobilizing their dissent and rage against a group of political elites). Although this process used to be designed and engineered carefully, it still provided some semblance of political expression for our civil society.

This mediatory process was annulled with the 2009 presidential election. On the one hand, the internal contradictions among the political and economic elite became so apparent that they could not fit even in an unfair election, and on the other hand, the internal gap was projected into a larger gap between the people and the government as a whole. Henceforth, the elections have been a series of attempts at healing the fracture, mostly within the ruling class, and sometimes with a select part of our civil society—namely, the urban middle class in the subsequent presidential election.

Within this history, one could say that the February elections, by themselves, do not play a significant role and the second round will even be less significant. But they do mark a turning point in the integrity of the ruling political elite. Note that today, the so-called rivals in the previous presidential elections are the heads of the executive, judiciary, and legislative administrations. The February elections marked the ending point in this integration process—which does not mean that their internal conflict of interests is solved, of course. The heads of the three branches have already made extra-judicial decisions, one of which was the increase in petrol prices last November that resulted in an unprecedented national upris-

regarding all parties and representatives: “All of you out.” So the left has not participated in the elections, and historically, it does not participate. There was a brief moment in 2016, in City Council Elections, that a kind of social democratic left formed a list and tried to get into the Council, but the conventional reformists won overwhelmingly and those leftists did not receive so many votes really.

At this point, it might be instructive to explain the political forces in the Islamic Republic in order to be clear about all the terms we use here in an international context, because in post-revolutionary Iran they have a particular meaning.

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) consolidated its power by violently suppressing both right-wing liberals and left-wing socialists and communists. However, up to Mohammad Khatami’s surprise win in the 1997 presidential elections, the main political tendencies in post-revolutionary Iran had been called “the Left” and “the Right.” The differences between these two political currents inside the Islamic Republic elite came to the forefront after the impeachment and subsequent escape of Abolhassan Banisadr, the first elected president.

The right wing of the IRI consisted of traditional merchants (Bazaaris), traditional clergy, and opponents of land reforms and critics of state interventionism in the economy. The left wing of the Islamic Republic had the support of Ruhollah Khomeini in the first years of the revolution. They called for the redistribution of wealth through subsidies, direct distribution of essential goods, and implementing heavy regulations on the free markets. Both political wings supported Islamization, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Velayat-e-Faghih), and anti-imperialist discourses.

The third parliament was controlled by the left. However, after Khomeini’s death and Khamenei’s ascent to supreme leadership as a right-winger, the left became weaker and weaker. The fourth and fifth parliaments were controlled by the right. After Khatami’s election in 1997, the duality between left and right was reformu-

the organizations and affinity groups; among teachers, workers, students, women activists, intellectuals, etc. It seems that people are less obsessed with their identity as “left,” but leftist currents and tendencies are taking the initiative in many of these groups.

What was the outcome of the 2018 wave of strike actions that took place throughout the whole of Iran—involving the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane worker in the north, workers at National Steel of Ahvaz in the south, and the nation’s truck drivers, who organized three nationwide strikes? At the time, it seemed that this cycle of struggle was conditioned by two key factors, both of which have much to do with the question of the global flow of capital towards finance and liquidity (the twin indicators that capital has shifted away from production and toward circulation): the United States’ economic sanctions that resulted from its withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement in 2019 and the depression of the Rial on the global market. Would we be right in saying that these were key factors that led to the strike wave? And how has the situation in the country changed since then, especially with the compounding effects of the sanctions alongside the COVID-19 pandemic?

J: The anti-Western discourse of the Islamic Republic should fool no one. From its Supreme Leader Khamenei to its president Rouhani, the regime supports the free market economy and a large-scale privatization plan that has been in play for decades. It is one of the largest in the region, beside Turkey, Pakistan, and recently, Saudi Arabia. The Iranian regime has always wanted to join the World Trade Organization and has followed the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring programs. The impact of such neoliberal policies is visible in “reforming” the healthcare system, the housing sector, the pension system, the de-subsidization of energy units, a strong move towards privatization through the stock exchange market, exponential growth of financial institutions and private banking, drafting austerity

budgets, and massive lay-offs in formerly state-owned factories and large companies.

This is the situation that served as the backdrop for the wave of strikes that you mention. This is a cycle of struggle that started around 2015 and saw an intensification of daily actions among the workers affected by those policies, the citizens that have been indebted or literally robbed by the new private financial institutions (which are connected to the Revolutionary Guards and went bankrupt in a few years), minorities and marginalized communities whose livelihood were endangered by anti-environmental development policies or simply negligence by the central government, and others. Reports had shown a daily average of six to eight local protests across the whole country during that period.

It is true that the US sanctions contributed to the protests, but in an indirect way. The sanctions made daily life much harder and deprived the government of its financial resources. But as I said, the neoliberalization and gradual dismantling of the semi-welfare state that was established after the revolution should be seen as the main cause of the protests. As one famous slogan of the Aban protests formulated it: "Our enemy is here/they lie that it is in the US."

Now, I mentioned the semi-welfare state that was established after the revolution... there is an important consideration here. Even if there was a kind of welfare system for ordinary citizens, it was like any other racialized state that did so at the expense of the minorities. Baloch, Arab, and Kurdish areas are much more underdeveloped, and the environmental issues resulting from unsustainable development in favor of the center are worse. The deep roots of identity-based (religious or ethnic) discriminations are another cause for social protests.

As you rightly mentioned, the COVID-19 epidemic and its related economic challenges have intensified discontent. But the Iranian government, already in the midst of an economic crisis, reopened the economy much sooner than it had to, and the workers

for the left, but the pandemic has escalated various gaps, most importantly between the government and the people.

In your opinion, what are some of the major consequences of the February elections? If we understand the series of events correctly, there is a second round of voting that has been postponed till September due to the pandemic. In the interim, what do you see as some of the key factors that led to a favorable outcome for the "hardlined" or principalist faction? And what has been the response from the Left, whether parliamentary or extra-parliamentary?

J: I mentioned that the Islamic Republic covered up the spread of virus in its early stage in order to do the parliamentary election; it was confirmed only the night before the polling. Why? Because the Guardian Council of the Constitution, a governmental body close to the Supreme Leader, made sure that conservatives would dominate the parliament by disqualifying even many "non-threatening" reformists, too. Conservatives won the election with the lowest participation rate in the history of the Islamic Republic. Now the head of the parliament is the former mayor of Tehran, a former Revolutionary Guard commander and former chief police, who has been accused of immense corruption but is very loyal to the Supreme Leader.

The unified conservative parliament is one of the pieces of the puzzle in the "transition period," referring to the selection of the next Supreme Leader. And the puzzle is a unified conservative government, homogeneous enough to ensure that the transition to the new Supreme Leader goes smoothly. The parliament, all the institutions of the so-called "republic," and its representation apparatus are all defunct. The crisis in the Islamic Republic is no longer about "legitimacy"—it is a crisis at the roots of governmentality itself. One of the main slogans of the movements of the past three years was "Reformist, conservative—it is the endgame." The slogan is an echo of similar slogans shouted at Syntagma Square in Athens or "Puerta del Sol" in Madrid or in the streets of Beirut

ing, a widespread solidarity. Social divisions are heightened; the fragmentation of productive social forces, which Negri calls “making salami out of social flesh,” is overwhelming. And a revolutionary movement so powerful that it can bring all the differences towards a strategic struggle with the regime is yet to come.

J-P: The government’s response to the pandemic was basically similar to other right-wing governments around the globe. At first, they were also in a state of surprise, denying the existence or later the significance of the pandemic. Later, they reorganized themselves to let the public deal with this problem on their own, and they even blamed the public for the pandemic. So, there was no official quarantine announced, since the government would have to take minimal responsibilities, and since then, they have only considered the needs of big businesses.

Our particular problems around this issue stems from two factors. One is the ideological elements that are vital to the power structure—for instance, these days we have the Moharram ceremony, a sort of carnival with no social distancing, and it was the government that decided to hold this ceremony. The other factor is the privatization of the health system and other forms of reproductive or care work, which makes collective self-care even more difficult.

The sanctions are part of the negotiating process between the political and economic elite; they have no tangible effects on this issue. Moreover, with or without sanctions, the position of the public facing the pandemic would not improve. On the other hand, the left has undergone devastating burdens. As part of our vulnerable public, the left had to deal with the pandemic on its own (we lost a credible and influential icon, Fariborz Raees-Danna, to the virus); the economic pressure and unemployment has kept the Iranian left busy making ends meet, and this will only get worse; and the lack of coherent policies has made it impossible for the left and other progressive forces to hold meetings or even to meet each other indoors. So there have been no particular avenues or possibilities

have had to work despite the coronavirus threat. This is another sign of the Iranian government’s neoliberal approach to social problems, in which it reduces all aspects of life to the exchange economy. However, the crisis has led to the intensification of protests from health workers and nurses, who were employed on 89-day contracts during pandemic without any recognizable benefits for such hard work.

Right now, protests are raging again in Iran. Haft-Tappeh workers are on their 78th day of strike, and their main demand is the cancellation of privatization, among other demands regarding wage and job security and health insurance. Additionally, some workers in oil fields have staged strikes. Factory workers in Tabriz, Arak, Mahshahr, and Asaluyeh, among others, railway workers in Tehran and Khorasan and Semnan, teachers and municipality workers and many others are protesting on a daily basis again. The left in Iran is careful to keep its distance from any American initiative against the Islamic Republic and it rightly rejects sanctions and any idea of foreign intervention. When a group from the royalist pro-Trump opposition began to voice support for the Haft-Tappeh struggle, the telegram channel of striking workers published a post rejecting their support, saying, “You are an agent of states, not a supporter of people.”

J-P: Let me start answering this question with a popular meme that became viral before the new wave of sanctions. The first image was an old apparently underprivileged elderly man sitting on some stairs with a look of utmost despair. The caption read “before the nuclear deal.” Underneath was the exact same photo with the caption “after the nuclear deal.” Today, you can add the same photo with the caption “post-post-nuclear-deal.”

The sanctions are not the root of the problem; they just intensify the situation. Privatization and the instructions of the IMF are the key factors that led to the strike wave. The policies started immediately after the war between Iran and Iraq (1988), and they have grown hand-in-hand with unimaginable corruption ever since. The

problems in both of the companies that you mentioned (both are situated in the south of Iran) started after they were handed over to the private sector. The documents regarding how and under what conditions Haft Tapeh was handed over still remain confidential; today, as the new wave of strikes takes place in Haft Tapeh (and they have marched in the city of Shush for three months now), the workers had to stop the robber-baron owner from selling the equipment of the company. Some scholars like Mehrdad Vahabi call this the “predatory state” that coexisted with some capitalist aspects of our society.

So the predatory state and so-called privatization, the key factors of working-class degradation, were going on before the sanctions and continued after them. The problem with sanctions is that they are aimed at the genuine potential of our society to make a radical change. They are designed to put the pressure on the masses—to render it even harder to organize—and they provide the best excuse for vast domestic repression and a suitable platform for the ever-increasing corruption of the robber barons.

How has the Iranian government responded to the pandemic? What effects have US sanctions had on the government’s response? And has the pandemic afforded the Iranian left new avenues of mobilization and new lines of alliance?

J: As I briefly said in response to the previous question, the government policy was that exchange value is more important than the value of human life. But this is not at all unique to the Islamic government, just like the many flaws and cover-ups in dealing with the coronavirus crisis. To mention just a few, the government has hidden the real official statistics, as leaked documents have shown. The official yet unannounced death toll is three times greater than the statistics made public, and the number of the patients also nears the same ratio. The virus was already in Iran around the time Wuhan was quarantined in China, but because the government-organized demonstrations for the anniversary of the 1979 Revolu-

tion as well as the parliamentary election were ahead, they did not report it to the public, according to those leaked documents. At the same time, the government did not provide financial relief or assistance to citizens, nor did it provide necessary services to the mostly Afghan refugees and immigrants who lack proper documents.

The US sanctions have had an effect on the response to COVID-19 in Iran. Washington says that the sanctions do not block medicine and medical equipment and other humanitarian imports. Technically, it is true. But their secondary sanctions on financial transactions with Iranian banks, their ruthless prosecution of the traders and the necessity to apply for exemption for “humanitarian” trade with Iran have made many exporters of medical equipment afraid of doing business with Iran. According to the US Treasury statistics, the number of applications for sanction exemption in the case of medical trade with Iran has decreased from 220 in the last quarter of 2016 (Obama’s last quarter) to only 36 cases in the first quarter of 2019, the last available data on the issue.

But again, the difficulties resulting from the US sanctions should not blind us to the decades-long neoliberalization of Iranian economy, the cuts in the health care budget and the increases in the military budget, the commercialization of health care, the precaritization of essential workers, and the like. Regarding the last point in the question, I cannot give a definite answer. In the beginning of the epidemic, new collective and local initiatives emerged providing care and support. But the intensification of the crisis made them weaker. The pandemic in Iran, as in many other places in the world, has shed light on the structural violence caused by class-based inequalities, neoliberalization, and various forms of discrimination.

Does this necessary translate into any sort of widespread social solidarity? Che Guevara says: “solidarity represents the affection of peoples” and Massumi describes such affective solidarity as a “belonging in becoming.” The situation in Iran, considering this point of view, does not translate into a mass revolutionary becom-