

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Economy may topple mullahs

*For the mostazafins, the very poorest, the situation is desperate enough for a new revolution.*

On May 17, several hundred thousand Iranians demonstrated in the largest cities of Iran against the five-year-long war with Iraq. In Teheran, several thousand cars created an enormous traffic-jam while passersby carried red flowers and distributed sweets to each other. But for a few incidents in Teheran, Ahwaz, and Tabriz, a few clashes with the Pasdarans (Revolutionary Guards), and a few arrests, the demonstrations came off peacefully.

Shahpur Bakhtiar, minister under the Shah, who had called for such passive resistance, was quick to claim success, and called on his supporters to stop demonstrating to avoid any bloodshed.

However, as many Bakhtiar supporters recognized, it was not merely the call by him several weeks prior to the events which had brought hundreds of thousands into the street. Rather, the success of Bakhtiar's call resulted from its timing: It coincided with events inside Iran that highlight growing unrest and disgust over the war with Iraq, especially on the part of those inhabitants of the cities who are now targeted by Iraqi bombs and missiles, as well as increased dissatisfaction at the economic mismanagement of the country by the mullahs.

Exemplary of the situation were the street-battles fought in the first week of April between the local inhabitants of northern Teheran and the Pasdarans. Shocking to the mullahs was the fact that these inhabitants belonged to the *mostazafin* (poor) layers,

who have previously been seen as the pillars of the regime.

Prompting the violence, in addition to food shortages, was that this particular quarter of Teheran had been systematically hit by Iraqi war-planes for several days, and had received no help whatsoever from the Pasdarans—but for a television team!

Immediately coming to the defense of the local inhabitants were some 20 members of parliament belonging to the conservative Hojatiyyah Brotherhood. They called for an end to the war. The Hojatiyyah, on religious grounds, have been opposed to the appointment of Khomeini as the Caliph of all Muslims. They were supported by a few grand mullahs such as Ayatollah Tabatabai, Ayatollah Golpayagani, and several others who have since been put under house arrest.

The growing opposition to the war now is directly based on the disastrous consequences it has had for Iran's fragile economy. While war on the borders with Iraq didn't really affect the daily life of the hundred of thousands of *bazaari* who sided with Khomeini against the Shah, the targeting of the cities has disrupted normal economic and trading activities. Furthermore, such disruption has been aggravated by Prime Minister Mir-Mussavi, who decided to impose communist-like economic measures which the traditional *bazaari* tradesmen are fundamentally opposed to. Using the channels of the Imams of the Friday Prayers, "Imam Jome," who

have a direct channel to Khomeini's official heir, Ayatollah Montazeri, and have a wide-ranging intelligence network to enable them to prepare their Friday preaching, the *bazaaris* have called for Mussavi's resignation and a "liberalization" of the economy.

However, a liberalization cannot make up for the fact that the Iranian economy has been steadily collapsing. Iran's GNP has declined by 50% since 1979, according to member of parliament Nadji Najafahdi, from 7,500 to 3,200 billion riyals. First to collapse has been Iran's agriculture, of which the mullahs claimed to be the defenders in 1979. The peasants and farmers were the first to be sent to the front, while millions of others fled the battlefield areas in the countryside for the cities.

Teheran, which had 5 million inhabitants in 1979, now has 9 million; Qom went from 200,000 to 2 million; Karadj from 300,000 to 2 million, etc. The massive exodus from the land naturally led to massive food shortages, which hit average families hard.

With an average monthly wage of 30,000 riyals (\$300), such basic food as a kilogram of potatoes will cost R300 on the black market, rice R1,000, meat close to R2,000. Rent in Teheran, for those who can afford an apartment, may go up to R20,000. Officially, as food is to be distributed centrally by local committees, the black market doesn't exist. Reality is otherwise, especially when Pasdaran members quickly buy all available food supplies for themselves—then to sell it at incredible prices to whomever can buy. Only dignitaries of the regime or favored families of martyrs can afford it—when unemployment runs as high as 6 to 7 million.

For the *mostazafins*, the situation is desperate enough for a new Iranian revolution.