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From the Editor

Soldiering on for Liberty: Iran's unrelenting Student Movement

Three years ago on 7th July, the very foundations of the Islamic regime were shaken by six days of unprecedented unrest initiated by thousands of young students across the country who sought nothing more than their claim to a civil society in which their rights for freedom of expression and democracy would be respected. In response, they were confronted by a brutal crack down that resulted in numerous injuries along with the mass arrest of anyone suspected of having inspired them into action. Three years on, student leaders such as *Manoochehr Mohammadi* and his brother *Akbar, Abbas Deldar, Mehrdad Lohrasabi, Hossein Yenta, Farokh Shafi'i*, and *Ahmad Batebi* whose image of holding the bloodstained T-shirt of a fellow student was portrayed across the globe on the front page of *the Economist* are still languishing in jail despite an untold number of interventions by leading international personalities and human rights organizations.

The lessons from that tragic experience however, seems to have been lost to Islamic leaders who have taken no meaningful step to remedy any of the basic underlying causes of that open revolt which has witnessed not only the students, but the entire population gradually distancing themselves from what can only be described as *theocratic despotism*.

The case of the students, and more generally speaking, the likely impact of the Iranian youth on upcoming events is a unique and unprecedented feature of contemporary Iranian society. While students, mainly from the middle classes, who were mostly inspired by leftist ideology were also active before the revolution, that scenario has now given way to a new situation where there is almost a seven fold increase in their numbers (from around 175,000 to 1,200,000) and includes people from all classes of Iranian society who are highly motivated with a strong sense of idealism as well as urgent priorities. 22 million Iranians are believed to be under 20 in a country where 75% of the population is under 34. It is estimated that some 20% of young people between the ages of 15 to 24 - who are the children of the revolution - and who constitute the student body of the country (of which slightly more than 50% are women) consider themselves without any kind of a future (and in the case without equal rights) in the IRI. Though exposed to the outside world through the internet, they suffer from internal censorship as well as all forms of ideological scrutinies. It is no wonder therefore, that a great majority of new graduates from various universities have desperately sought to leave the country. In fact, the number of educated graduates flowing abroad in quest of better opportunities and greater freedom has soared in recent years and is currently standing at somewhere around 230,000 people per year and rising. Recent statistics show Iran ranking first among countries experiencing the brain-drain phenomenon, which has been one of the most burdensome problems of the society in which nearly half a million new graduates are added to the annual unemployment list.

For the less fortunate, the options have been more frightening as hopeless young people without any prospect for a better future are having to turn to drug addiction and prostitution - the very sins that the Islamic regime was to have altogether eradicated from the country. The estimated number of drug-addicts within the confines of the country is reported to be around 4 million, while the resurgence of prostitution puts their estimated number at 300,000.

Moreover, drug-addiction and a steady increase in the incidence of prostitution have also been instrumental to the rapid growth rate of AIDS within Iranian society; sources from within the country put the estimated number of the infected at more than 10,000 and rising!

There can be no doubt that the current social, political and economic impasse which is the result of years of negligence, mismanagement and despotism is leading the country to a point of social explosion. In a country without political parties and organized labour unions where classical models of workers strikes and the like are nearly impossible to organize, the role of *AvantGarde* in Iranian society has been taken up by an aspiring youth population who on 7 July 1999, bravely displayed its courage and determination for everyone to see. While their demands for civil society, democracy and secularism were unable to attain its objectives at that time, there is no question that they captured the attention of the entire Iranian people and the world beyond. In the end, the IRI will have no option but to bow to every single one of their legitimate and unrelenting demands. □

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