If you ever have had the pleasure of being whacked in the head by a riot squad goon in black Kevlar, then you and I have something in common. For me, it happened in central Tehran in July 2009 at an opposition demonstration against the Islamic Republic’s sketchy presidential election and subsequent state repression against protesters. I had already witnessed some serious mayhem over the summer of 2009, as well as some amazing solidarity between protesters of various classes and social backgrounds. This was the high point of the opposition “Green Movement” in Iran, before it started to dwindle in numbers and unity as 2010 rolled around. But during that summer, I watched as Iranians shared strategies of countering the effects of tear gas, organized methods of pushing back the police, and debated the list of demands they wanted opposition leaders to embrace.

I thought I was a serious protest ninja, able to weave in and out of crowds without any repercussions. Until, of course, my ninja skills faltered and I got whacked on a hot July day in the
middle of a student beatdown. The first thing I noticed, curiously, after I escaped, was that the baton in question was short and had a soft rubber tip. I could have been hit by something much worse: the notorious street militias in Iran, known as the basij, were swinging long metal poles and 2x4s with nails in them. The poor schmuck who hit me had at least taken a short course in crowd control, and I could tell he really didn’t have his heart in it. His hate was not pure.

That baton gave me a sort of epiphany. The Islamic Republic seems pretty scary to most Americans—a few mullahs here, a few bearded militants there, throw in a nuke and mix—and there is often an assumption that power in Iran operates along different principles than in Western states. That baton told me otherwise: why so soft?

Iran had a huge social revolution, only three decades ago, which overthrew the authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy. It brought millions onto the streets, heightened popular expectations, and forced the new government to claim legitimacy partly through the people’s will. This revolutionary dynamic, no matter how much it became watered down by the often reactionary and violent methods of rule by the new Islamic Republic, never disappeared. It has continually been reformulated through different social movements in Iran which realized the promises and possibilities of social change.

Politics did not disappear in Iran in 1979 and reappear in 2009 just in time for CNN’s cameras and the New York Times. Students and women have demanded greater popular participation in the political and social sphere, workers have demanded higher living standards, and peasants have demanded land and government support. The state responds, sometimes with its left hand (semi-free elections, universal education, birth control for married couples, welfare programs, land reform) and sometimes with its right hand (disqualification of election candidates, media crackdowns, no independent trade unions, arrests of activists). The political elite has always been split into various factions, and this has sometimes provided space for social demands to be heard.

States only respond to those groups with social power—there’s nothing different in this about Iran compared to the US or anywhere else. But one dynamic of any revolution is the social empowerment of new groups and classes. This includes a new political elite, whose schisms and internal battles have determined much of the trajectory of the Islamic Republic’s politics since 1979. But it also includes the newly educated youth, first generation female college graduates, migrants to large Iranian cities, and workers in Iran’s large industrial sector. There is power in all these groups as well. Of course they do not all agree with each other’s politics—the Green Movement’s demands were mostly of a political nature and did not address the deep social concerns about inequality and equal access to resources that form the core of working class grievances in Iran. But that does not mean that this empowerment is false—the Iranian state is frankly scared, as any state should be of its population. And this is why that goon’s baton was soft.

There is little likelihood of a repeat of 1979 in Iran—no total revolution is in the cards. Ask any Iranian inside the country (not the Iranian diaspora in the US, who are too often obsessed with nationalist delusions of nostalgia like any diaspora) and they will tell you they prefer a less cataclysmic event. But US activists should know that there is an internal struggle in Iran for social justice which has its own rhythms, victories, and disappointments. Any intervention by the US will undoubtedly aid the Iranian state, allowing them to monopolize the revolutionary discourse of nationalism for their own ends. Even sanctions, which are sold to us as “targeted” and “smart,” are a form of economic warfare. They never achieve their intended consequences, precisely because
US policy makers know next-to-nothing about how the complex Iranian economy actually works. US sanctions against a supposedly “terrorist” government bank in Iran means that small and medium sized Iranian businesses have to pay more for loans, lay off more workers, and stop hiring new college graduates. Not only are economic sanctions war by other means, but they are counterproductive for those who hope for social change in Iran.

It has become shockingly clear to US elites in 2011 that the Middle East is “just like us.” They are now attempting to manage the “new realities” of a historical wave of revolt. But also, it has hopefully become clear to US radicals that the global South has more to teach us than we do them. Iranian struggles for social and political rights are something that only the Iranian people can make for themselves. We must be in critical solidarity with such forces in Iran, and the best place to start is by stopping US war, through whatever means, in Iran and beyond.

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