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Iranian regime shuts down internet following protests over gas price hikes

Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime has been shaken by mass protests, some of which turned violent, against a dramatic increase in gasoline prices.

Demonstrations and road blockades erupted Friday only hours after the price hike took effect. The protests reportedly spread to a hundred cities and towns across the country on Saturday and Sunday, and continued, at least in some measure, yesterday. Government spokesman Ali Rabiei said there had been "gatherings in some cities, in some provinces" on Monday, but that "tomorrow and the day after we won't have any issues with regard to riots."

The most senior leaders of the Islamic Republic have accused ultra-reactionary forces aligned with US imperialism of using the protests to foment violence and "anarchy."



Protesters in Iran, Credit: @Bahram_Goor (Twitter)

In a nationwide address Sunday in which he proclaimed his support for the gas price hikes, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei named the US-based monarchist opposition, which seeks to restore the son of the hated Shah to the throne, and the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq or MEK, as instigators of the violence. The MEK has been actively promoted by many current and former Trump aides, including John Bolton and Rudy Giuliani.

In his address, Khamenei conceded there had been some deaths in what he called clashes between “thugs” and “hooligans” and security forces.

Already Saturday evening, Iran’s Supreme National Security Council had suspended internet access across the country. As of last night, the blackout remained in force, with access allowed only to a limited number of government-approved sites.

Washington, in an act tantamount to war, has unilaterally imposed a de facto economic blockade on Iran with the avowed aim of crashing its economy. Now it is hypocritically voicing support for the protesters. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who last November told the BBC’s Persian service that Iran’s leaders had to bow to US demands if “they want their people to eat,” tweeted, “The United States is with you.”

The White House issued a statement Sunday that denounced the Iranian regime for using “lethal force” against “peaceful protests.” It also said, “Tehran has fanatically pursued nuclear weapons” and “terrorism,” repeating the lies Trump has used to justify Washington’s illegal blockade, which includes an embargo on all Iranian energy exports and bars Iran all access to the world banking system, thereby throttling its foreign trade.

Blinded by imperialist arrogance, the authors of the White House statement evidently did not realize the self-incriminating character of the conclusion of their inflammatory tirade, which cited the Islamic Republic as “a cautionary tale of what happens when a ruling class abandons its people and embarks on a crusade for personal power and riches.”

Given the Islamic Republic’s internet blackout and the Western media’s animus toward the regime, it is difficult to gauge the size, composition and precise character of the protests.

Government and intelligence officials do concede that there is genuine popular anger against the price hikes, which were imposed without prior warning.

Speaking at the conclusion of a cabinet meeting Sunday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said it was “natural” that some people were opposed to the government’s plan

and had the “right to give voice to their opposition.” But “the government will not allow anyone at all to [create] chaos and insecurity,” by rioting, he added.

“People started their demonstrations in peace on Saturday morning,” said Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani, the head of the Basij wing of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps. “But in the evening of the same day a wave of unrest was created by the support of the country’s enemies.”

Government reports put the number of persons killed during the protests at a dozen, including two security personnel and a security guard. The BBC and other Western news outlets cite government opponents inside Iran as saying the true figure is double or more than that.

On Sunday, the semi-official Fars News Agency cited an intelligence report that claimed 87,400 people had taken part in the protests. Of these, it said only a small fraction had taken part in violent activities.

Many of the protesters, said the report, “were merely present at the location of rallies and did not cooperate with rioters, and many of them have received warning messages on their cell phones from security organizations to avoid further participation in protests.”

The report further claimed there had been widespread property damage, with “more than 100 bank branches and 57 big stores... set on fire or sacked in one province alone.” It said more than a thousand people have been arrested across the country for participating in or inciting violence.

That the US and its Saudi and Israeli clients will seek to exploit growing popular alienation and anger against the Iranian regime to advance their own reactionary agendas is indubitable.

It is also true that recent years have seen growing popular opposition to the Iranian regime, in the form of strikes and demonstrations over job cuts, poverty wages and lengthy delays in the payment of wages. The final days of 2017 and the beginning of 2018 saw widespread protests against social inequality and austerity, including in poorer rural towns and cities that had hitherto served as a base of support for the regime.

The current protests and the government’s response speak to the acute social tensions within Iran as the economy buckles under the relentless pressure being exerted by Washington, and the crisis of the bourgeois nationalist regime, as it attempts to maneuver between imperialism and Iran’s workers and toilers.

Friday's price hike imposes a 50 percent increase on the first 60 litres of gas purchased by a car owner, to 15,000 rials—the equivalent, due to the collapse of Iran's currency, of just 13 US cents. The cost of additional litres has been raised by up to 300 percent.

The price of gas in Iran remains among the lowest in the world. The price hike, however, has sparked widespread anger because years of austerity imposed by all factions of the Iranian political establishment and punishing US-led sanctions have led to mass unemployment, shrinking incomes and ever-deepening social inequality.

Initially the government touted the price rise as a measure to combat smuggling, one moreover that was in accordance with IMF recommendations for Iran.

But in the past 72 hours, it has insisted that the real motivation was to provide greater financial support for ordinary Iranians. As early as yesterday, the government began depositing money in Iranians' bank accounts that, it says, will compensate them for cutting back the subsidized price of gas. According to the government, ultimately a total of 60 million people or more than 70 percent of Iran's population, will be eligible for the monthly payments.

The government first introduced small direct cash payments to Iranians in 2011, when it eliminated or rolled back subsidies on an array of staple foods and products. Under the now modified scheme, a family of five will be eligible for a payment of \$US17 per month.

The Iranian press is claiming that as early as Friday, Khamenei criticized Rouhani's government for not rolling out the subsidy increase and the gas price hike in tandem.

The Supreme Leader's declaration of support for the gas price hikes in his statement Sunday was aimed at least in part at trying to prevent the protests from deepening the cleavages within the regime. Some of Rouhani's social conservative opponents had announced that they were going to press parliament to rescind the price hikes, saying they were illegal. But after the Supreme Leader made clear his support, they backed down.

Replying to statements by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French Foreign Ministry echoing Washington's denunciations of the Iranian regime's response to the protests, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif noted that the European powers, despite their professed support for the Iran nuclear accord, have aided and abetted Washington in re-imposing the brutal sanctions.

The growing social and political crisis in Iran underscores the urgency of the working class intervening as an independent political force in opposition to imperialism, its direct

agents such as the monarchists, and all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie. The fight for a workers' republic in Iran must be linked to the struggle to mobilize the working class and oppressed across the Middle East against Washington and imperialism as a whole.

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