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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TUDEH PARTY*

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: The Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran has announced the dissolution of the "Tudeh" communist party after leaders who had been imprisoned for several months went on television to declare themselves guilty of espionage for the Soviet Union. The regime has also struck more directly at the USSR by expelling 18 Soviet diplomats. This marks the final collapse of the Iranian CP's opportunistic strategy of seeking an increase in political influence by supporting the Islamic revolution, a strategy weakened by its habitual solidarity with Moscow.

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These are dark days for Iranian Communists. On May 4 the Islamic revolutionary regime's prosecutor-general announced the dissolution of the already formally outlawed "pro-Soviet and treacherous Tudeh" (Party of the Masses). Four days earlier the party's leader, First Secretary Nouredin Kianuri, had gone on Iranian television to make an abject confession that he and other party members had for years spied for the Soviet Union, by delivering "top secret military and political documents to our bosses at the Soviet Embassy." He and some 70 other party members had been rounded up by the security police in February, with a second wave of arrests following in late April. Now all party members and supporters still at large have been ordered to present themselves at the prosecutor's office, on pain of being considered "counterrevolutionaries and plotters against the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The Iranian regime's move was obviously aimed not only against the hapless Tudeh. This was emphasized on May 4 when the Foreign Ministry declared 18 Soviet diplomats *personae non gratae* and ordered them to leave the country within 48 hours. The deterioration of Soviet-Iranian relations in recent months has been linked with the reported resumption of Soviet arms supplies to Iraq, with which Iran has been at war since the fall of 1980, although the USSR has maintained an outwardly neutralist attitude to that conflict. An editorial in Pravda of May 6, carried in advance by TASS, denounced the expulsion of the diplomats as "arbitrary and totally unfounded," a "malicious provocation" by unidentified enemies of Soviet-Iranian relations. (1) The editorial ridiculed the charge that Tudeh leaders had been spying for the Soviet Union:

The true worth of such "confessions" is well known. It is an open secret that during the past two years Iran's punitive bodies have thrown into prison most members of Iran's Tudeh Party. Methods of obtaining "confessions" inherited from the Shah's Savak secret police were applied to those arrested.

Under the circumstances, however, the Soviet counterattack was significantly moderate. It was noteworthy, for example, that the editorial did not criticize the Iranian Islamic regime as such, but rather certain unidentified "Iranian circles . . . which are pushing their country toward the road of the proimperialist policy that became bankrupt during the Shah's regime." The Soviet leadership was evidently concerned to preserve whatever possibility time might bring of improving relations with the Islamic revolutionary regime. To put it another way: the Tudeh Party could expect no real help in its time of trial from a Soviet regime that had in the past never shown hesitation about sacrificing the political interests of the Tudeh to its own state interests.

Much stronger than the Soviet reaction was that of the French CP. Its newspaper depicted the Tudeh leaders' confessions of espionage and high treason, allegedly obtained under torture and through drugs, as the work of

(1) TASS, 5 May 1983.

the Iranian reaction, whose final goal is the physical liquidation of the communist party, a complete break with the USSR and the [other] socialist countries, normalization of relations with the United States, and the abolition of the achievements of the people's revolution of 1979. (2)

The article added that the Iranian Right, whose dominance had been confirmed in recent months, had been carrying out an anti-Soviet campaign tending to make the Soviet Union into the principal enemy of the Iranian nation, to the benefit of the United States. (The charge that the Iranian authorities responsible for crushing the Tudeh are also working in the interests of the United States must seem richly implausible to anyone even vaguely familiar with the Islamic regime's persistent anti-Americanism. [3])

The Strategy That Failed. The dissolution of the Tudeh and the arraignment of its leaders on charges of pro-Soviet espionage and treason mark the end of an Iranian communist strategy that consisted essentially in the effort to establish what might be termed a parasitic relationship with the Islamic revolution, in the apparent hope that the Tudeh's time would come as a well-organized force backed by the neighboring superpower, if and when the regime of the aging Ayatollah Khomeini finally collapsed in chaos.

That strategy was associated with First Secretary Kianuri. In fact, it might be said that he became the party leader because his predecessor, Iradj Eskandari, failed to see the possibilities of such a strategy in the closing days of the Shah's reign. Even as evidence mounted during the last weeks of 1978 that the dominant element in populist opposition to the Shah was religious sentiment, with Khomeini as its charismatic leader, he missed or minimized its significance -- out of touch with Iran, perhaps, after three decades of comfortable exile in East Germany. In an interview given to the French CP newspaper in late November 1978 he conceded that religion had some influence over the movement, because "mosques have been almost the only meeting places," but insisted that "this is definitely a deeply political movement" (and by "political" he evidently meant "nonreligious"). (4)

Eskandari paid for this lack of perception. In early January 1979 he was abruptly replaced by his deputy, Kianuri, who returned to Teheran from East European exile to implement a very different strategy, expressed in his first policy statement:

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- (2) Dominique Bari, "Hunting Down Iranian Communists," L'Humanité, 4 May 1983.
 - (3) Take, for example, Teheran Radio's vindictive comment of April 20 on the tragic bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut: "The Islamic peoples have sworn to block the imperialists and to become bombs that explode in the US spy courtyards."
 - (4) L'Humanité, 27 November 1978. He expressed similar views in an interview given to the December 1978 issue of Problems of Peace and Socialism. See Kevin Devlin, "Iranian Communist Victim of Islamic Revolution," RAD Background Report/38 (World Communist Movement), 15 February 1979.

The Tudeh Party approves the initiative of the Ayatollah Khomeini for the creation of the Council of the Islamic Revolution. The program of the Ayatollah coincides with that of the Tudeh. . . . Every government that follows the line laid down by the Ayatollah will have the support of the Tudeh. (5)

At times the party rather overdid the new line of fulsome enthusiasm for Islam. Thus, on 19 January 1979 the Tudeh's "clandestine" radio station, the National Voice of Iran -- which actually broadcasts from the Soviet Union, reportedly from Baku -- began a political commentary with the words: "In the name of Allah, the merciful and generous, dear fellow citizens and brother Moslems . . ."

If the element of opportunism in the new line was obvious, however, the central question was whether it would bring opportunity. On balance, that seemed unlikely. Islamic zealots did not hide their distrust of the Tudeh. In January 1979 one of Khomeini's close aides, Ibrahim Yazdi, said flatly that there would be no cooperation with the Communists, because "there is a basic incompatibility between their ideology, their political philosophy and political goals, and our own." (6)

One reason for Islamic distrust, which at the same time was the Tudeh's greatest political handicap, was that throughout its checkered history it had been identified with the USSR and noted for its subservience to the Kremlin. In fact, the original Communist Party of Iran was founded in 1920 in the province of Gilan on the banks of the Caspian Sea, temporarily occupied by Soviet troops and proclaimed as a short-lived "Persian Socialist Soviet Republic." It was largely as an attempt to escape this liability that the party was refounded in 1941 as the Tudeh (Masses) Party. At the end of World War II, however, Soviet occupation of the northern Iranian province of Azerbaijan, and the abortive attempt to establish a communist-dominated, separatist government there in 1946 again gave the Tudeh the unpopular "Made in Moscow" stamp. The party which had had three ministers in a coalition government in 1946 (perhaps because of Soviet pressure) again retreated into the shadows. Linked with an attempted assassination of the Shah in 1949, the Tudeh was declared illegal, and entered for three decades into the clandestine condition from which it now hoped to emerge by hitching its wagon to the star of Islamic revolution: a perilous venture.

Ups and Downs. The party was now able to operate openly and publish its newspaper, Mardom. But Kianuri's repeated calls for an anti-imperialist national front were made in vain: he was indulging in buoyant rhetoric when he told a Hungarian interviewer early in 1979 that, although "for subjective reasons"

(5) Le Figaro, 29 January 1979.

(6) UPI (Paris), interview, 25 January 1979.

other political leaders were reluctant to enter officially into a front of national unity with the Tudeh, "we can safely declare now that this front has, in practice, been established on the battlefield of the streets, in factories, at universities, and in villages." (7)

In pursuing this line the party experienced ups and downs (as when religious zealots took over its Teheran headquarters in July 1980). But it stuck to that line, in contrast to other radical movements such as the national-Marxist Fedayin-e-Khalq (Strugglers for the People). The party's leading ideologist, Politburo member Ehasan Tabari, recently justified the Tudeh's line in these terms:

Extremists, leftists, and Maoist groups, which have an influence among some sections of the intelligentsia, claim to be revolutionary but are in fact bourgeois and fail to understand the substance of developments in the country. While holding forth on combatting "religious reaction," they have in practice taken the stand of reactionary religion, alongside the Bazargans, (8) alongside the United States. But true Marxists in Iran, with a scientific analysis of the course of the revolution, have chosen the right course based on a non-dogmatic, nonschematic understanding of the operation of the [Marxist-Leninist] laws. . . . (9)

This shrewdly opportunistic strategy had a fundamental weakness, however. This lay in the potential conflict between support for Islamic revolutionary policies and support for Soviet policies. The Tudeh lost a lot of ground, for example, by its endorsement of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan; although it supported the war effort against Iraq, it was fatally hurt by Iranian reactions to the reported Soviet rearming of Iraq. So now the night has closed in again: the opportunists have lost their gamble, and the opportunity has gone.

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(7) Nepszabadsag, 9 February 1979.

(8) The reference is to an early, moderate Prime Minister of the Islamic regime.

(9) Ehsan Tabari, "The Role of Religion in Our Revolution," World Marxist Review, December 1982.