

Rojhelat Rises: Reflections on the General Strike in Iranian Kurdistan

by Kamran Matin - 12/09/2018 14:25



Today, September 12, Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan is on general strike.

Following a wave of executions of Kurdish political prisoners and missile attacks on Kurdish opposition parties' bases deep inside Southern/Iraqi Kurdistan, a politically and ideologically diverse group of Kurdish and leftist political forces called for a general strike on September 12. So far, reports indicate that the majority of Rojhelati Kurds have responded positively and the strike has been highly successful.

'Mass strike', Rosa Luxemburg argued, 'is not artificially "made," not "decided" at random, not "propagated". It is a historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability'.

What are the 'socio-historical' conditions' that subtend today's general strike in Iranian Kurdistan?

1. The Iranian regime is currently facing one of its most acute crises. It is struggling

with a deepening economic crisis resulting from the cumulative effects of more than two decades of illiberal neo-liberalization, in which state institutions and their rentier appendages have engaged in a ruthless 'accumulation by dispossession.' This process has thrown millions upon millions into poverty. The socio-politically disintegrative impact of the process has been intensified by the US-imposed sanctions that were temporarily lifted following the nuclear deal with the West, but re-imposed after Trump walked out of the deal.

2. Amidst this deep socio-economic crisis, the regime also suffers from a structural crisis of legitimacy. During the first two decades of the Iranian regime's life, a combination of authoritarian welfare regime and radical-Islamist ideology centered on 'justice' mitigated the political impact of socio-economic hardship, as people still believed in the regime propaganda. The effects of the regime's subsequent 'race to the bottom', government officials' open and systemic theft of public resources, and shocking levels of corruption are all amplified by the ideological bankruptcy of the regime as the gap between its discourse and practice has become so deep as to be unbridgeable.

3. Amidst this general crisis, the regime's response is to obliterate any potential opposition so that it secures its reproduction by its sheer irreplaceability: the absence of an alternative. This has been pursued through a strategy of systematic political repression over the past four decades. While normally of a low-intensity character, this strategy has taken on large-scale and open forms to cause mass intimidation. Khomeini's anti-Kurdish 'jihad' in 1980, the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988, and more recent waves of executions and military attacks on Kurdish opposition are examples of this tendency.

4. This brings us to Kurdistan, for Kurdistan has often been the most intensive site for the regime's brandishing its 'iron fist' policy vis-a-vis the opposition and the people more generally. Just as non-Western lives don't matter in Western states' pursuit of (their) 'greater good', Kurdish lives are also the cheapest and most expendable for the Iranian regime. This colonial perception of the Kurds as subaltern subjects that are better dead (literally and/or metaphorically) is engrained in the political psyche of a succession of modern Iranian states since early 20th century. One has only to remember Ayatollah Khomeini's speech in 1980 when he ordered his 'jihad' against Kurdish people. He recited the Quranic verses: 'Show severity towards infidels and mercy towards each other'[1] excommunicating the Kurds just as *Daesh* excommunicates (*takfir*) all its 'others'. The repressive campaign against the Kurds had to logically follow and rest on their demonization; by an assertion of their 'sub-Muslim' status. Substantively speaking, this is no different from the Western colonial

practice of declaring the non-Europeans as 'sub-human' and/or 'backward' in need of Europe's blood-soaked 'civilizing mission'.

5. In more complex and subtle forms, the Iranian state's colonial subjectivity vis-a-vis the Kurds animates and is reproduced by the ideology of Iranian nationalism. Here Iran is construed as an 'ethno-culturally' heterogeneous commonwealth consisting of distinct 'qowms' (*ethnies*), which have come together in a historically voluntary act to form the Iranian 'nation'. In this discursive construction of Iranian nation individual 'ethnies' (*qowms*) are subordinated to the 'nation', both culturally and politically. What this misleadingly benign construction of the Iranian nation unsuccessfully hides, or when pressed justifies, is that the cultural heterogeneity that is supposedly the content of Iranian nation is hierarchically organized: with the 'Persian' language and culture at the top, where it subordinates all 'other' languages and cultures. A deliberate process of the 'development of underdevelopment' has always accompanied this ideological-political process. The history of this subordination and exploitation, and their reproduction is written in 'blood and fire' in Kurdistan and other 'peripheralized' and 'minoritized' parts of Iran.

The foregoing account also sheds light on the roots of the historically and politically liminal character of Kurdistan and its structural propensity towards radicalism and militancy. An illustrative analogy might be made through the application of the classical Marxist concept of the 'weakest link of the imperial chain' at the domestic, national level. Kurdistan is the weakest link of Iranian state's semi-fascistic rule. The same circumstance marks other parts of Kurdistan vis-a-vis their ruling states: Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. This is also why Kurdistan and Kurds are, and remain, the most determined and progressive force in the struggle for radical democracy, social justice and gender equality in the region. Today's general strike in Iranian Kurdistan is a glaring example of this condition.

[1] *Qowms* (ethnies) are subordinated to the 'nation', both culturally and politically. What this misleadingly benign construction of the Iranian nation unsuccessfully hides, or when pressed justifies, is that the cultural heterogeneity that is supposedly the content of Iranian nation is hierarchically organized: with the 'Persian' language and culture at the top, where it subordinates all 'other' languages and cultures. A deliberate process of the 'development of underdevelopment' has always accompanied this ideological-political process. The history of this subordination and exploitation, and their reproduction is written in 'blood and fire' in Kurdistan and other 'peripheralized' and 'minoritized' parts of Iran.