

ENGLISH EDITION

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# The National Iranian Uprising and the Dilemma of the Left

The January 2026 uprising in Iran has plunged the Left into an identity crisis



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To many in the **West**, the spectacle seems surreal: exiles and students filling city streets by the tens of thousands, demanding the monarchy's return and

celebrating the military intervention by Israel and the U. S. For those who recall the 1970s anti-monarchy protests, this is bewildering. By rallying behind Reza Pahlavi, son of Mohammad Reza Shah, the movement challenges **two pillars of left-wing thought: anti-bourgeois ideology and anti-Western imperialism.**

At the same time, progressives, long committed to **universal human rights, cannot ignore the Islamic Republic's brutal crackdown** – described as one of the deadliest massacres of street protesters in modern history. Yet, many hesitate to back an uprising invoking the authoritarian, pro-Western monarchy overthrown in 1979, where left-wing forces played a decisive role.

**That discomfort is deepened by the failure of the Iranian Left** – most notably the MEK/NCRI Party that had been instrumental in overthrowing the Shah – to produce a credible leadership of their own. With no viable alternative leader other than

Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Mohammad Reza Shah, supporting the uprising has become a political dilemma for Western progressives.

For Iranians risking their lives for dignity and basic rights, this hesitation feels like betrayal. Once seen as allies, Western progressives now appear distant. Persian-language social media accuses them of double standards: swift outrage elsewhere, muted response here. Coverage of the digital blackout and the killing of at least 30,000 protestors often frames events as a geopolitical “power game,” sidelining protestors’ agency. Calls for negotiation dominate, while concerns **about oil transfer routs and regional stability overshadow** the demand of regime change in Iran’s streets.

Some observers blame the muted reaction of mainstream media on the difficulties of verifying the scale of the regime’s violence. Verifying fragmented reports amid severe internet restrictions is difficult, and the regime’s coordinated troll networks further muddy the information space and strain independent media. Yet, this alone does not fully explain the Left’s inaction.

A deeper identity crisis is at work. Traditionally, the Western Left countered capitalism by advancing equality, emancipation, and justice through socio-economic reform. Since the Vietnam War, however, a significant segment has embraced an identarian anti-colonialism that casts the “West” as the primary source of oppression – even in countries untouched by Western rule. In this view, “colonialism” extends beyond political domination to encompass the fundamentals

of bourgeois West:  
humanism, secularism, and  
free trade. The present, if  
temporary, alignment of parts  
of the Western Left with  
radical political Islam, anti-  
imperialism, and anti-Israel  
platforms reflects this shift.

From its inception,  
the **Islamic Republic**  
**of Iran** has  
**skilfully** positioned itself  
within this framework. It  
appropriated the language of  
resistance while hollowing out  
its moral core, especially the  
inviolability of human dignity.  
The regime has  
instrumentalized anti-  
capitalist and anti-modernist  
strands within left-wing  
thought, particularly as some  
Western progressives,  
beginning in the 1960s,

recast radical political Islam  
as emancipatory.

As vigilance against  
Islamophobia became a  
central moral cornerstone –  
especially after 9/11 – the  
regime fused anti-Western  
rhetoric with hostility toward  
Israel, portraying it as a  
colonial outpost. By funding  
and arming proxies such as  
 Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis,  
 Hashd al Shaabi, and Bashar  
 Assad's forces, and branding  
 them as "resistance"  
 movements despite their  
 worldwide criminal networks,

Tehran advanced this narrative. Simultaneously, it financed think tanks, conferences, research groups, and media outlets in the West to polish its image. In doing so, it often shields itself from left-wing criticism, speaking the idiom of resistance even as it represses its own citizens – leaving parts of the Western Left intellectually trapped.

This is not to say the Left's anti-imperialist impulse is wholly misguided. Western powers have toppled governments, extracted resources, and redrawn borders with lasting harm. Such critiques remain vital. But when anti-imperialism hardens into dogma – casting the West as perpetual aggressor and its adversaries as presumed victims – moral clarity erodes, and opponents of the West gain automatic moral credit.

In democracies, scepticism toward power sustains accountability. Yet, this worldview can harden into reflexive victimhood, projecting wishful thinking onto non-Western nations

rather than supporting their emancipation on their own terms. Iran – one of the oldest nation-states – complicates the familiar West-versus-victim narrative. Never colonized, it adopted Western bourgeois norms to pursue a national, homegrown modernization. This accelerated under the Pahlavi dynasty and halted with the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Many on the Left, however, dismiss Iranians' calling for a revival of pre-1979 civic values as reactionary. They see the longing for the bourgeois political system that prevailed in that era as mere nostalgia caused by 'buyer's remorse', or even worse, as an Iranian 'Stockholm-syndrome' caused by a desire for imposed Westernization and subservience.

But memory is not static. Those who look back cite a secular national project that sought to introduce modernity and citizenship – contrasted with decades of theocratic repression and isolation. Iranians favouring a return to the Pahlavi era's constitutional monarchy – albeit a reformed one without

past authoritarianism – find it  
dismaying that progressives  
dismiss their claims as  
reactionary.

Iran's struggle, thus, defies  
neat left-wing templates. It is  
neither a classic proletarian  
revolt nor an anti-colonial  
uprising, but a nation  
reclaiming itself from a  
regime that fused Marxist  
revolutionary ideology with  
religious universalism. In  
1979, the idea of bourgeois  
nationhood was subordinated  
to global class struggle or a  
transnational umma. Today's  
protesters voice a return to  
that national pragmatic civic  
identity beyond clerical rule.  
However, the old left-wing  
formula – bourgeois  
nationhood being  
reactionary\ anti-Western  
theocracy meaning  
resistance – has endured  
reducing the nation's  
aspirations to nostalgia or  
geopolitics. Such criticism  
can sound condescending  
when protestors demand  
basic rights – free speech,  
security, and secular  
citizenship – echoing  
universal humanism. Their  
welcoming U.S military  
intervention to achieve their

goals, further unsettle the Left. War is often seen as imperial coercion, yet history resists binaries: it is catastrophic, but has also defeated tyranny. Iranians expect moral clarity that sustains such tensions without collapsing them.

For the Left, the Iranian uprising is thus more than a revolt against a regime; it is a test of the core values of progressive politics; namely, solidarity with the oppressed. It forces the Left to confront difficult questions: can it separate its justified critique of Western power from appeasing to a murderous regime simply because it opposes the West? Can it unequivocally condemn the Islamic Republic and support the Iranian people without either fearing alignment with Western imperial interests or betraying the universal human rights it claims to defend? Can it affirm that human dignity is indivisible and separate from global “power games” – equally vital in Syria, Gaza, Ukraine, and Iran?

Western measures – such as designating Islamic Republic's Guard Corps as a terrorist organization and freezing the assets of regime affiliates – are despite being overdue, welcome. Yet they fall short of the urgency required as sham trials and executions ordered by the Iranian regime accelerate.

As Iranians welcome the U. S. led intervention, they are met with apprehension. What they want the world to understand is that they are not asking for ideological allegiance. They are asking for moral consistency – that when they bleed in the streets, their suffering is not reduced to a footnote in someone else's (anti)imperialist script.