

Ukraine coup intensifies conflicts within Iran's elite

Keith Jones
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Last month's US-instigated, fascist-spearheaded coup in Ukraine has intensified the deep divisions within Iran's bourgeois political elite over the Islamic Republic's relations with US imperialism and its European Union allies.

Those sections of the Iranian media most supportive of President Hassan Rouhani's recent overtures to the US and EU are parroting Washington's lies. Like the Obama administration and the Western media, they are hailing the overthrow of Ukraine's elected president as a "democratic revolution" and denouncing supposed Russian "aggression."

So-called "hardline" or Principalist politicians, and the media voices associated with them and with the Revolutionary Guards, have condemned the putsch against President Viktor Yanukovich as a US-orchestrated "regime change" operation.

Faced with US war threats and devastating US-EU economic sanctions, Iran's rulers have signaled through Rouhani's seven-month administration their readiness to reach an accommodation with Washington. But there are huge apprehensions and bitter internal conflicts over this course, since it will require Tehran to submit to US strategic dominance of the Middle East and throw open Iran's economy and oil wealth to rapacious exploitation by Western transnationals.

Under a six-month interim agreement that came into force in mid-January, Iran rolled back and froze large parts of its civilian nuclear program in exchange for extremely limited, reversible sanctions "relief." Rouhani and his political mentor, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, hailed this agreement as a "win-win" that could quickly lead to permanent reconciliation with Washington.

However, prominent "hardliners," including Revolutionary Guard leaders, voiced grave concern over the fact that the key sanctions—those that halved Iran's oil exports and froze it out of the global banking system—remain in force. Some also publicly questioned whether secret additional concessions were made to Washington.

In an attempt to contain this conflict, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has repeatedly declared that he

is doubtful an accommodation with Washington can be reached, even as he instructs the clerical-political establishment and military-security apparatus to support the government's overtures to the US.

However, the Ukraine coup and the confrontation between the US and Russia have thrown the differences within Iran's political establishment into relief.

Officially, the government has said next to nothing about the Ukraine events—itsself an indication of sharp conflicts behind the scenes. The Ukraine crisis has also rekindled the dispute over the challenge that the middle-class Green movement, with massive US and EU support and based on unsubstantiated and implausible claims of a stolen election, mounted to the results of Iran's 2009 presidential elections.

The pro-Rouhani-Rafsanjani press, both "reformist" and "conservative," has unabashedly identified itself with the Ukrainian putsch, splashing orange—the color identified with the US-German-sponsored ultra-conservative and fascist forces—and flattering photos of the pro-US oligarch Yulia Tymoshenko on their front-pages.

"I consider the developments in Ukraine as extremely positive for the strengthening of democracy in that country," declared Tehran University professor and prominent Rafsanjani advisor Sadegh Zibakalam. "I believe Russia's influence in Ukraine has got a giant crack and Russia by occupying Crimea shows its total disrespect for international laws."

In touting the US-sponsored coup in Ukraine, important sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie are signaling their readiness to align with US strategic interests not only against Russia, but also China.

Reslat, a conservative paper with close ties to Iran's bazaar merchants, argued that Iran could benefit by providing gas to Europe should Russia respond to US-EU economic sanctions and military threats by disrupting gas shipments to Europe through Ukraine.

Rafsanjani has stepped up his campaign for Iran to seek a new partnership with Washington. On March 8 remarks published on his website, which were widely reported in pro-

Rouhani newspapers the next day, urged the restoration of full diplomatic relations with the US for the first time since the 1979 Revolution that overthrew the bloody dictatorship of the US-backed Shah. “We do not care that they are a superpower,” said Rafsanjani. “Let them be a superpower as long as they let us do our business.”

Meanwhile, *Kehyan*, a prominent newspaper, which is formally under the direction of Supreme Leader Khamenei, published an editorial that deplored the government’s inability to articulate a policy on a crisis involving a country (Russia) “that solves some of its national security and political concerns with the help of Iran and mutually supports Iran in the case of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the nuclear and other issues.” While not saying explicitly what policy Iran should follow, the editorial indicated Tehran, “though we have differences,” should not leave Russia in the lurch when it “is fighting our enemy the West.”

Some hardline voices have argued that the US-Russia confrontation may provide Iran with an opportunity to gain greater Russian support in the nuclear talks between Teheran and the P-6 (the permanent UN Security Council members and Germany) and in weakening the punishing US-EU sanctions regime.

Others have focused on the implications for Iran of the aggressive US strategy of fomenting internal opposition to bring about “regime change” and its readiness in the case of Ukraine to court the risk of war, even nuclear war, to do so.

“We hope that the recent developments in Ukraine instill vigilance in those naive enough to believe the sedition [the 2009 Green movement] was only an incident,” Iranian MP Alireza Salimi told the country’s parliament. “The developments in that country (Ukraine),” he continued, “demonstrate the scenario that the enemy dreams of for our country.”

The bitter debate within the Islamic Republic’s ruling elite over the events in Ukraine was further inflamed by last week’s visit to the country by Baroness Catherine Ashton, the EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner and the lead negotiator for the P-6 in the nuclear talks with Iran.

Ashton was one of the chief EU actors in orchestrating the Ukraine coup and has been helping lead the propaganda campaign that paints Russia as the aggressor. In fact, for the past 20 years, the EU and Washington have been relentlessly pressing to expand NATO to Russia’s borders, and they organized the overthrow of Ukraine’s elected president.

While in Iran, Ashton held a meeting at the Austrian embassy with women activists associated with the Greens and signaled that the EU intends to cynically play the human rights card to pressure Iran, even as it employs fascists and anti-Semites to do its bidding in Ukraine.

Following Ashton’s visit, the foreign policy team of Fars News Agency, which has close ties to the Revolutionary Guards, posted an article entitled “Ashton’s trip: the utmost indiscretion of Iranian diplomacy.” It chastised the government for allowing the visit to proceed, noting that Ashton came to Tehran not in her capacity as lead P-6 negotiator but as EU Foreign Policy Commissioner. By welcoming Ashton amid the Ukraine crisis, the government had “seriously jeopardized” Iran’s prospects of using the crisis between the Western powers and Russia to “drive a wedge between the members of the 5 +1.”

The Fars piece also argued that by allowing Ashton to meet persons involved in the still “very (politically) sensitive” post-2009 election unrest, the foreign minister was imperiling “national unity.” Ashton, it added, “most likely planned this meeting with the intentional goal of puncturing this unity.”

While the US and its EU partners have been preoccupied with their drive to assert imperialist domination over Ukraine and thereby further weaken Russia, they have by no means taken their eyes off Iran.

On Thursday, US Secretary of State John Kerry told a Senate committee: “We have made it crystal clear that Iran is not open for business.” He added that Tehran will have to make “some very tough decisions” before the US agrees to any permanent settlement of the nuclear issue. British Prime Minister David Cameron denounced Iran as a “despotic” regime Wednesday. Speaking to the Israeli Knesset, Cameron said he shares the Israeli government’s “deep skepticism and great concern about Iran.” Nuclear-armed Israel has repeatedly threatened to undertake unilateral military action against Iran.



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