

**In the August issue we published an interview with a leading representative of the Tudeh Party on the repression of Tudeh and the nature of the Khomeini regime. We continue this discussion with a different, more critical view.**

Fred Halliday

# Iran's Revolution Turns Sour

IN THE EARLY PART OF 1983, the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini celebrated the fourth anniversary of the Shah's fall, and of the proclamation of the Islamic Republic. Despite many predictions of its imminent collapse, Khomeini's state has remained in existence and gives every sign of having consolidated a political and social base that could ensure its survival. Yet it is at this point, of apparent stabilisation and growing self-confidence, that the Islamic rulers have decided to launch something which they had hitherto avoided, an all-out attack on Iran's communists, grouped in the Tudeh or Masses Party and in several other organisations linked to it, most noticeably the Fedayin-Majority. According to the regime, the number of Tudeh sympathisers and members came to around 10,000, of whom, by mid-May, 1,500 had been arrested. Independent and Tudeh sources give figures of 50,000 or over for members and sympathisers, and of much higher numbers arrested.<sup>1</sup>

## A terrible blow

The first move in this campaign came in February 1983, when the leadership of the Tudeh Party was arrested and charged with spying for the USSR. Initially, a figure of around two dozen arrests was given. Regime officials suggested that members of the party who were prepared to renounce espionage could continue as a legal party. But it later became evident that something much more serious was afoot. On 4 May the Tudeh Party and its affiliates were banned, a move publicly endorsed by Khomeini. All Tudeh Party members were ordered to report to the police. A succession of party leaders, beginning with secretary-general Nureddin Kianuri, was shown on television, confessing to espionage for the USSR and calling on their followers to renounce Marxism in favour of Islam. Government officials indicated that, once they had revealed all they knew, those guilty of serious crimes would face the normal penalty — execution. They promised a public trial in which the accused would reveal what they had been doing. It seemed from the television appearances that those so presented had been tortured, and reports emerged of the seizure of Tudeh Party premises, files and documents across the country. At the same time, propaganda against the Soviet Union and communism increased. The Soviet Union was now said by some sections of the Islamic Republican regime to be a greater enemy than the USA and, on the day the Tudeh Party was banned, 18 Soviet diplomats, about half the staff of the Tehran embassy, were expelled.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the scale of execution that is to follow, there is little doubt that Iran's communist party has suffered a terrible blow, from which it will take a long time to recover. Virtually all of the central committee has been arrested, and Tudeh Party members in neighbouring states, Turkey and Pakistan have also been arrested. Indeed, in comparative perspective the defeat of the Tudeh in 1983 must rank with the great debacles of the international communist

movement. It is more serious, in terms of the impact on the party, than the repressions of communists in Iraq in 1949, in Egypt under Nasser, and in the Sudan in 1971. It bears, rather, comparison with Indonesia in 1965, Chile in 1973 and Germany in 1933. Yet, as in all such cases, the comparisons concern not only the level of repression visited upon the communists by a right wing regime, but also the political decisions taken by them which led to the subsequent catastrophe. Solidarity with those in Khomeini's jails cannot preclude examination of the circumstances that brought them there.

## Historical background

The tragedy of the Tudeh Party, and the policies it pursued, can best be seen in the context of modern Iranian history and of the manner in which the initial hopes aroused by the Iranian revolution have been dashed. In this perspective, the events of 1983 can be seen as the third tragedy of the Iranian communist movement. The first was in 1921, when the new military regime in Tehran crushed an insurgent republic in the north of the country. The second was in 1953 when the army, backed by Britain and America, overthrew the nationalist government of Dr Mosadeq and destroyed the Tudeh's then widespread organisation. The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 appeared at first to offer the Tudeh a new opportunity: yet, four years later, it was to suffer a defeat even greater than those of 1921 and 1953.

## There is little doubt that Iran's communist party has suffered a terrible blow.

Iranian communism has a long and militant history<sup>3</sup>. The first Iranian communists were migrant workers in the oil industry of Czarist Russia: during the 1900s many joined the Bolshevik Party and during the upheavals in Iran of 1906-8, known as the Constitutional Revolution, socialist groups played an active part. The Communist Party of Iran was founded in June 1920 — the very first communist party in Asia, established before those of China, Japan, Vietnam or India. At the famous Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in September 1920, Iranian communists played a prominent role. This activity was supported by the Bolsheviks and, in the confusion prevailing in Iran at this time, the CPI was able to ally with guerrillas in the wooded Gilan hills along the Caspian Coast and proclaim a socialist republic.

Yet this early breakthrough soon fell foul of the factors that were to bedevil Iranian communists later. In Gilan itself, divisions arose between the communist and Islamic factions of the movement. The new military regime in Tehran, led by Reza Khan, the father of the last Shah, was backed by Britain and it was a priority for the new government to destroy the pro-Soviet regime in the north. On their side, the Russians were faced with the overriding need to

make peace with Britain in order to alleviate the pressure upon their own regime, and this forced them to withdraw military support for the Gilan revolutionaries. By November 1921 the Gilan Republic had been crushed.<sup>4</sup>

### A formidable force

The events of 1921 were followed by two decades of dictatorship under Reza Khan, and the defeat of Gilan had major consequences for the CPI. Reza Khan signed a treaty with the Bolsheviks and this allowed him to suppress the CPI throughout Iran. In 1931 all organisations professing 'collectivist' ideologies were banned. Amongst Islamic forces, the Gilan experience was used as evidence of the conflict between Muslim and communist forces — a lesson to which today's followers of Khomeini still allude. The CPI's leading cadres were in exile in the Soviet Union, where some perished in the purges, and so it was that in 1941, when the British and Soviet invasion of Iran deposed Reza Shah, it was not the Communist Party but a new formation, the Tudeh Party, that was created. This was partly to circumvent the 1931 law, under which the CPI remained illegal, and partly to present a broader image and attract sections of the population that might not have joined a communist party.

Amidst the tense economic and political conditions of the war, the Tudeh attracted a large following and by 1946 it was a formidable force. It had up to 100,000 members and close sympathisers and a trade union federation of 350,000 members. It was by far the largest organised group in Iran, the first nationwide political party in the country's history. According to *the New York Times* correspondent at that time, it would have won 40% of the vote in a free election.<sup>5</sup>

The Tudeh recruited from two main sectors: educated middle class people, who saw it as the bearer of modernity and enlightenment that contrasted with the pro-imperialist court and with the obscurantism of the mollahs; and industrial workers, over a quarter of party membership. The Tudeh was also the first political force in Iran to mobilise women. But, despite the advances it had made during the war, it was soon to lose ground. In 1946 two Tudeh members joined the government, in a trusting error that mirrored the overconfidence of communist parties in Europe at that time and prefigured the even greater mistake which the Tudeh was to make with Khomeini. Prisoners of their participation in government, the Tudeh was unable to prevent the government from liquidating the left wing autonomous forces in the two provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, after which the Tudeh representatives were expelled from the cabinet.

### Mosadeq

With the defeats in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran, Tudeh membership began to wane: the party was losing prestige. In 1949 the Shah banned Tudeh, after an attempt on his life in which the Tudeh was allegedly implicated. The Tudeh was soon, however, able to restart semi-legal activity, but when the nationalist premier Mohammad Mosadeq came into office in 1951 and nationalised the British-owned oil industry, the Tudeh made a major mistake. In keeping with the dominant line of the communist movement at that time, which saw bourgeois nationalists such as Mosadeq, Gandhi and Nasser as class enemies, the Tudeh initially opposed the nationalist government. Mosadeq was, it was claimed, a 'slave' of America, which wanted to oust Britain from its position in Iran. By the time, in 1953, that the Tudeh Party had begun to change its policy, it was already too late. The Eisenhower administration had by now decided that Mosadeq had to be ousted. Sections of the clergy were actively

opposed to Mosadeq. And the Tudeh's backing for him was lukewarm: for example, when the government tried to raise money by issuing bonds, the Tudeh told its members not to subscribe. When the coup came, in August 1953, the Tudeh was passive. It had thousands of members, and a secret network inside the military of around 600 officers. Yet the party did not try and stop the coup and it at first minimised the extent to which the military victory had altered the situation. Its members were gradually tracked down, although a small group of army personnel, led by Khosro Ruzbeh, continued armed resistance until his death in 1958. Whether Tudeh could have prevented the 1953 coup is debatable: that it damaged its political reputation for a generation by its passivity is not.

### Tudeh's decline

The paralysis of 1953 reflected the party's misestimation of the forces inside Iran. It must also have reflected the reluctance of the

<sup>1</sup> For a Tudeh analysis of recent events see the interview with A. Sadeq in *Marxism Today*, August 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Material on the recent events surrounding the Tudeh is given in BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts* Part IV The Middle East. This covers both the statements of the Iranian government and the broadcasts of the Tudeh radio based in Soviet Azerbaijan, the National Voice of Iran.

<sup>3</sup> There are three main sources on the history of the communist movement in Iran. Sepehr Zabih *The Communist Movement in Iran* 1966 provides a general overview. Ervand Abrahamian *Iran Between Two Revolutions* 1982 gives a detailed analysis of the Tudeh Party in the 1940s and 1950s. The early history of the movement is discussed in Khosrow Shakeri *Le Parti Communiste Iranien 1916-1980* Paris 1980. Shakeri has also published in a number of volumes the writings of the early Iranian communists: see *Histoire du Mouvement Ouvrier et Revolutionnaire en Iran*, Florence 1978 and following years.

<sup>4</sup> On this period see my 'Revolution in Iran: was it possible in 1921?' *Khamsin* no 7 Ithaca Press 1980. The core of the argument is that the Bolsheviks were justified in aiding the communist guerrillas in northern Iran in 1919 and 1920, but that the pressure on them was such that, by 1921, they had no alternative but to withdraw this support.

<sup>5</sup> On this see Abrahamian, *op cit*, ch 7.



new and untried Soviet leadership to engage in a confrontation with the USA at a time when it was seeking a thaw after the death of Stalin. But the central error was the sectarian attitude of the Tudeh to its potential allies, a replay of the Third Period sectarianism that brought the German communists to defeat in 1933. At its Fourth Plenum in 1957 the party made a partial self-criticism, but the events of 1953 took a great toll upon it. For the next quarter century, its activities were mainly in exile — publishing, running a radio station. Membership stood at around 5,000. Despite its claims to this effect, the Tudeh Party played no significant role in the revolution of 1978-9. Moreover, the Tudeh was discredited amongst a wide section of young people, who came into politics after the 1953 coup. At first, they followed Mosadeq. Later, in the 1960s, many of them turned to Maoism and strands of independent Marxism. In the 1970s, radical Islamic ideas attracted the greatest following.

The Tudeh Party's uncritical support for the USSR, even when Moscow sold military supplies to the Shah, and the ease with which on one occasion the secret police, SAVAK, infiltrated Tudeh cells antagonised an opposition movement that survived and grew despite the Shah's repression. The self-criticism which Tudeh made in 1957 did little to overcome this, particularly because on the question of its attitude to the USSR it maintained a classical pro-Soviet position. Given the lack of objective analysis of Iran's modern history, it was possible for the Tudeh's opponents, with some success, to distort the record and argue that the party had actually in some measure supported the 1953 coup, and the party's support in 1944 for a Soviet oil concession in the north of the

### Once Khomeini began to criticise the USSR the problems arose.

country, to counter the British one in the south, was repeatedly used against it as an indication of its subservience to the USSR. In a perverse way, the Tudeh also fell victim to its own past successes, as well as to its failures: for there developed what can be termed a 'myth of the Tudeh', of a vast conspiratorial grouping that was evoked by royalist and Islamic forces to justify attacks upon the Left. The truth was that in the 1960s and 1970s the Tudeh enjoyed nothing like the influence which its enemies attributed to it. Yet, in the end, it was to fall victim to that myth.

#### The 1978-9 revolution

The revolution of 1978-9 caught the Tudeh, as it did the rest of the secular Left, by surprise. Just prior to the Shah's fall there was a change of position within the party: the existing secretary-general, Iraj Eskandari, was replaced by Nureddin Kianuri, a former architect who advocated a more militant backing for Khomeini. When the Shah did fall, legal activity became possible again, and the Tudeh leaders returned to Iran. They published their paper, *Mardom* (People), and ran candidates in elections. But although they were able to recruit some young members and to re-establish contact with sympathisers of the older generation, they won no great successes. Young secular militants looked to the Fedayin guerrillas, and the majority of radical youth was won over by the Islamic currents. The one great success of the Tudeh came in 1980 when the Fedayin organisation itself divided into a Minority faction, loyal to the old independent Marxist positions and hostile to Khomeini, and a Majority, which aligned itself with the Tudeh without merging with it.

But as the political climate in Iran worsened, so it became more difficult for the Tudeh to operate, even though it professed support for the regime. In 1980 and 1981 its buildings were attacked and

temporarily closed. About 14 months after the revolution of February 1979, the party stopped issuing membership cards. In March 1981 several important Central Committee members were arrested: no one ever heard from them again. In 1982 the party press was finally banned completely. Yet the Tudeh leaders still believed that they could preserve a margin of freedom, and in order to comply with the regulations governing political activity and keep their legal status they supplied the regime with lists of the names and addresses of some Tudeh leaders. It was these very lists which the Islamic Guards used to arrest the communist leadership one early morning in February 1983.

#### Growing repression

This four-year saga took place against a wider background of increasing repression in Iran. The Tudeh was the last, not the first, to meet such a fate. Within weeks of Khomeini coming to power, in March 1979, there were protest demonstrations about the new Islamic restrictions on women. All of the organised left parties tried to avoid a clash then. In August 1979 there were mass demonstrations in Tehran against press censorship and the denial of autonomy to the ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds. Only the socialist National Democratic Front officially supported these protests. Then in 1980 and 1981 the Islamic forces themselves began to split and in June 1981 urban guerrilla war broke out following the dismissal of Bani-Sadr as President and the open clash between the regime and the Mojahidin guerrillas backing Bani-Sadr. The Mojahidin had become increasingly critical of Khomeini but only started military opposition when their last ally in the regime, Bani-Sadr, was ousted. From 1979 onwards there had been fighting in the western mountains, between government and Kurdish forces. By mid-1981, all democratic liberties created by the revolution had been abrogated: the press was completely censored, the universities were closed, all independent workers' organisations had been broken, political opponents had been arrested in the tens of thousands and many had been tortured and shot; televised 'confessions' of political prisoners were frequent.

Throughout this period, the Tudeh and the Fedayin-Majority were the only significant secular political forces in the country not to support this growing opposition. There were those within its ranks who opposed the backing for Khomeini and the party was seriously divided; but Kianuri and his associates maintained the view that at almost any cost the Tudeh had to maintain itself as an organisation and not antagonise the regime. Why then, if the party was so supportive, did the regime attack it in early 1983? First, there had from the beginning been a conflict in foreign policy between the regime and the Tudeh. Khomeini insisted on the slogan 'Neither East nor West', while the Tudeh saw the USA as the only enemy. As long as Khomeini was concentrating his fire on the USA this was not a problem; the Tudeh supported the seizure of the US hostages. But once Khomeini began to criticise the USSR the problems arose. The Soviet intervention in support of the Afghan party in December 1979 led to one set of conflicts; the Soviet decision to begin supplying Iraq with arms in its war with Iran, a move initiated in mid-1982, was far more serious. Soviet weapons were now killing Iranians on the front.

#### Iran and the West

By 1982 there was a clear divergence between Tudeh and the regime on the war: the former wanted an immediate end, the latter prosecuted the campaign. A second factor was the shift within the regime itself: virulently anti-communist forces had always been present inside the Islamic regime, but it was in 1982 that they came most clearly to the fore. In parliament, three social reforms


were blocked by these forces — land reform, the nationalisation of foreign trade, and the expropriation of exiles' property. If others had been willing to ignore or tolerate the Tudeh, these were not. Thirdly, despite its consolidation, the regime now faces great internal problems: it has done virtually nothing to improve the lot of the poor, in town or country, and the lack of progress in the war with Iraq, with its enormous costs in money and life, have to some extent sapped morale. So, just as the seizure of the US embassy in 1979 was used on that occasion to divert domestic opinion, so now another equally fictitious crisis is being used by creating a conflict with the USSR. This time, however, the hostages are Iranians, and it is most unlikely that they will be flown to freedom after 15 months in captivity.

There are those who see the attack upon the Tudeh as part of Iran's attempt to win support in the West. Tehran is known to be keen to buy more arms from the USA, something Reagan has till now refused to do officially, while tolerating private sales. Some official signs in Iran now proclaim the USSR to be a greater enemy than the USA, and trade with western countries has increased dramatically since 1980. In June 1982 a Soviet diplomat at the Tehran embassy, Vladimir Kuzichkin, defected to Britain and he is alleged to have provided British intelligence with a list of Tudeh and Soviet personnel active in Iran: some claim this list was then handed on the Iranian government by Mrs Thatcher's ministers. It is certainly true that what Khomeini is now doing internally must delight the West: but his regime has its own reasons for doing it, and, in its impact on the Arabian Peninsula and other neighbouring states, Iran still poses a great problem for the West. There has not been a CIA coup in Tehran, or a sudden, Sadat-type, rapprochement with the West. Rather, the Islamic revolution has continued to run its course, revealing an immanent repressive and

anti-democratic character that was temporarily masked at the beginning.


The core of the problem lies not in speculation about Mr Kuzichkin but in analysis of the Tudeh's overall evaluation of the Iranian revolution. The Tudeh's view was that, on balance, the Islamic regime was progressive.<sup>6</sup> It had ousted the USA, broken ties with Israel and South Africa, destroyed CENTO, joined the Non-Aligned Movement and withdrawn troops from Oman. At home it had nationalised banks and insurance companies and promised to redistribute wealth. Kianuri and the others stressed that Khomeini should be judged on his political record, not as a religious personality. They also argued that Shi'ite Islam, the brand dominant in Iran, was inherently progressive and that given the mediaeval character of mass ideology it was inevitable for some time that the majority of the population would remain under its influence. The irony was that the great increase in the urban population brought about by the Shah's development programmes had created a popular base more open to Islamic thinking than the more restricted base upon which the Tudeh had built itself in the 1940s. The conclusion was that the Tudeh should at all costs preserve itself as an organisation and survive. This was the line that Kianuri pursued from 1979 onwards. The Tudeh was not wholly silent in the face of what was taking place in Iran. It supported the Afghan revolution and the Soviet intervention to support it, called for an end to the war with Iraq, and attacked the 'Neither East Nor West' slogan. From the latter part of 1981 onwards, it made some criticism of the regime's treatment of political opponents. But its main stress continued to be on the need for unity of all 'anti-imperialist' forces and on many occasions it supported the

<sup>6</sup> Examples of the positive evaluation of Khomeini by the Tudeh can be found in *MERIP Reports*, No 86 March-April 1980.

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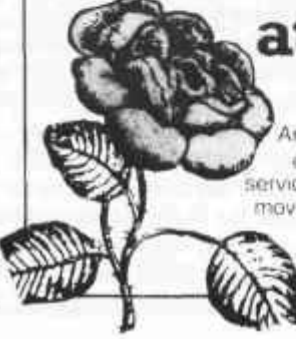
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### Islamic fundamentalism

The revolution has presented no easy choices to the Iranian Left, but the Tudeh obviously made a great mistake in interpreting the intentions of the Khomeini regime: the latter caught the Tudeh in a trap which was then sprung at the most convenient moment. But the problem goes further than that, to the question of what the regime itself represents. The social basis of the regime rests on two groups: the clergy themselves, who want to control the mechanisms of the new state, and the traditional petty bourgeoisie of the cities, who favour a repressive capitalist model cemented by Islam and fuelled by oil revenues. Given the distribution of minimal services and income through the mosques, and the popularity of Khomeini as the person who overthrew the Shah, it has become possible for the regime to muster and maintain considerable support amongst the urban poor. Where these factors have proved insufficient, a terror of truly fascist proportions has been deployed.

The ideology offered by Khomeini is not neutral or progressive, but deeply and consistently reactionary, far more so than the pro-imperialist and capitalist ideology of the Shah. The Iranian revolution struck a blow at US influence in the Middle East, and mobilised the oppressed masses, but Khomeini now seeks to impose on Iran a model of government and a set of values derived from the seventh century and legitimated by reference to divine

## The most fundamental issue of all is the attitude of the Left to political Islam

authority, interpreted by the clergy. A European socialist movement that grew out of the struggles against monarchy and the church needs to remember the elementary lessons of what something like Khomeini's policy represents, in theory and in practice. Reactionary mobilisations through religion are not unique to Iran. Khomeini has legitimised the most brutal repression of all worker and democratic groups. He has cast the female half of the population into second-class status and obscurity. He has mobilised urban youth for cruel and chauvinistic campaigns against the ethnic minorities. Khomeini not only rejects democracy in practice, but even in theory, because it challenges the authority of God: he has always been a relentless foe of socialism, communism and any ideology that challenges his fanaticism.

The fate of the Tudeh underlines the nature of the political situation in Iran and the enduring components of that situation which any socialist organisation, whatever its choices, would have to confront. There certainly were no easy choices. While it is a country with a long history of urban and ethnic revolt, and one where enormous social tensions have been created by the Shah's modernisation programmes, Iran is also one where anti-communist sentiments have always been very strong. Any socialist movement in a country that borders the USSR has to handle the problem of demonstrating that it is independent of a country that many see as a national foe. Iran is also a country where religious and millenarian ideas have flourished for thousands of years and these provide not only an alternative but a militant and intransigent rival to secular and socialist programmes. Under the Shah's dictatorship the conditions for the growth of the religious opposition were doubly strengthened: on the one hand, the new social basis in the cities was one specifically amenable to the policies of the clergy and

the traditional petty bourgeoisie; on the other, the ability of the secular parties to reach the population was reduced by the repression to which they were exposed. Only the mosque was able to function as a centre of opposition. The hostility of the Khomeini forces to socialism therefore represents not only its class interests, but also the specific strength of two ideological components of Iranian life, anti-Soviet nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

### Costly errors

These objective factors cannot, however, provide a sufficient explanation of the defeat which the Tudeh experienced in the spring of 1983. For there were other elements, in the Tudeh's own choices, which brought this debacle about. First there was the sectarianism of the party, one all too reminiscent of its misguided approach to Mosadeq, and indeed one redolent of that whole Third Period factionalism that facilitated the Nazi victory in Germany in 1933. Sectarianism in Iranian politics is by no means a unique attribute of the Tudeh: the other components of the Iranian Left have demonstrated their affinity for it often enough. But the Tudeh's support for the Islamic attacks upon other sections of the Left in the period from 1979 onwards must rank with the errors of the KPD as costly errors of the international communist movement. The antagonism of other progressives in Iran towards the Tudeh also reflects a scepticism about the internal workings of the party, in particular the lack of any visible internal democracy. The other major political forces of the Left — the Fedayin and the Mojahidin — have exhibited similar authoritarian patterns of internal organisation, and, as a whole, these traditions, taken from the centralism of the communist movement and the authority patterns of religious organisation alike, have prevented the Left from posing a clear, convincing alternative to the Khomeini regime. Any successful regrouping and reconstitution of the Iranian Left needs also to involve the development of an independent position on the USSR, one that guarantees the organisational freedom and political autonomy of the Iranian Left, even as it avoids adopting a facile anti-Sovietism that would benefit the USA, and would preclude the evolution of a confident and critical interaction with the Soviet Union on issues of mutual concern.

The most fundamental issue of all posed by the Iranian revolution is the attitude of the Left to political Islam. For all that was positive in the overthrow of the Shah, it is now evident that the Islamic regime represents a force even more reactionary than the Shah's, one nearer fascism than socialism.<sup>7</sup> No amount of reinterpretation of the Koran or tactical accommodation to the regime's policies can obscure the deep, irresolvable contradiction between the political programmes of the socialist and Islamic fundamentalist movements. This basic, brutal, truth was known to the early Bolsheviks, and has in the intervening years been unjustifiably obscured by relativist accommodation. Yet, in both Iran and Afghanistan, it is evident that the struggle between the regressive appeals of a politics based on Islam and the progressive alternative of socialism is one that cannot be avoided. This is the deepest lesson of the tragedies of Iranian communism, in 1921, 1953 and 1983. It is one which the Islamic foes of socialism have not forgotten and which socialists would do well, calmly and with resolution, to remember too.

<sup>7</sup> These points are well made and developed in Mohammad Jafar and Azar Tabari 'Iran: Islam and the struggle for socialism' *Khamsin* no 8 1981.

*Protests against the imprisonment and torture of the Tudeh Party leaders and hundreds of Tudeh members, and demands for their immediate release, along with the other persecuted Iranian democrats, should be addressed to: Iranian Charge d'Affaires, 27 Princes Gate, London SW7 1PY — Editor.*