

Iranian Revolution, 1979

Nandini Bhattacharya

The Rule of the Shah

In 1953, a CIA-sponsored coup d'état overthrew the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh and firmly installed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as the dictatorial ruler of Iran. The era of martial law (1953–7) and the Baghdad Pact brought Iran closer to the West, particularly the US and its military and economic aid. The elite-based modernization program of the government, known as the White Revolution, and the increasing arbitrariness of the Shah had alienated not only certain Islamic religious and political groups but also a number of intellectuals seeking democratic reforms. Both denounced the Shah's subservience to the United States. Throughout the late 1970s there were widespread religion-led protests, supported by and involving as participants a vast majority of the disaffected population.

The Shah's regime suppressed all opposition from the working class and the left, jailing and torturing some 20,000 political prisoners with the help of Iran's security and intelligence organization, the SAVAK. Relying solely on oil revenues, especially from 1973, the Shah's pursuit of developing Iran as a mighty Gulf power within the US hegemony ultimately increased poverty for the masses and destroyed political freedom. Growing oil profits helped Iran to become the world's largest arms importer in the 1970s and to acquire a huge army – with an air force rivaling that of France – which became the guardian of US interests in the Persian Gulf. At the same time, the oil money and US military aid that flowed into Iran served to industrialize the country and create a sizable working class, with some 2.5 million people employed in manufacturing and 70,000 workers in the all-important oil industry.

The Origins of the Revolution

A significant drop in oil revenues in 1975 and the aggravated economic crisis, with disparities and

cuts in wages, helped to explode the seething discontent into a widespread popular rising that eventually toppled the Shah's regime. For the first time in 14 years, thousands of slum dwellers in Teheran protested publicly against the Shah in June 1977. These movements by workers and the urban poor, followed by legalization of some opposition, opened the floodgate of protest between July and September, involving other sectors of society such as intellectuals and *mullahs* (traditional clergy) who had felt left out of the earlier economic boom and squeezed by foreign companies. The protests culminated in one of the largest demonstrations in history, bringing together some two million people in Teheran on September 7, 1978, although the regime retaliated by imposing martial law and massacring over 2,000 demonstrators. Subsequent strikes, particularly the strike of 30,000 oil workers, brought the country's economy to a standstill, sparking off a massive strike wave in which workers took over factories, offices, hospitals, and universities across the nation. *Shoras* (democratic workers' committees) were organized, which either bypassed or confronted owners and managers. Slum dwellers' committees were also set up around local mosques, thereby playing a key role in allowing the clergy to take control of the movement of the marginalized urban poor. They also took over the functions of the police and army by patrolling the neighborhoods. The main forces on the left, People's Fedayeen, People's Mojahedin guerillas, and the Communist Tudeh Party, played a leading role in mobilizing urban subaltern revolts.

On February 11, 1979, a rebellion of the Shah's army at the instigation of the Fedayeen and Mojahedin guerillas paved the way for Ayatollah Khomeini's forces and his coalition of clergy and liberal capitalist politicians to seize power. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, just returned from exile, was able to capture the leadership of a struggle actually initiated by the working class. Despite the prominent role of the working-class strike, as Sepehri (2000) has observed, the strike committees made no coordinated attack on the structure of the capitalist system, nor was there much coordination with civil society institutions outside the workplace. This gap was filled by the religious opposition, which held a relatively privileged status, while other forces were completely smashed.

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Khomeini and Islamic Fundamentalism

Since the early 1960s, Khomeini had been identified as a religious leader who had conducted a hate campaign against the Shah. Strongly opposed to the Shah's autocracy from an Islamic moralist standpoint, he began to attract much popular attention and was therefore repeatedly exiled by the Shah regime. Intellectuals and, more intriguingly, clerics in Iran upheld freedom as a sacred goal. This was reflected in numerous statements issued on the eve of the Islamic Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Shariat Madari, and others. Khomeini was vehemently opposed to the spread of the western model of secularization, introduced in Iran by the Shah's reform program. Khomeini was imprisoned more than once, from 1963, for fomenting anti-establishment protests through his writings and speeches during the White Revolution. Khomeini's attack on the Capitulation Law, whereby any member of the US army held guilty in Iran would be tried according to US laws, met with six months' imprisonment. This had terrible repercussions when the prime minister of Iran, Hassan Ali Mansur, forced Khomeini to apologize upon his release; when he refused to do so, the prime minister slapped him. Hassan Ali Mansur was assassinated soon after this event. Four members of Fadayan-e-Islam, a secret fundamentalist society closely associated with Khomeini, were executed for the crime while Khomeini was exiled.

In exile Khomeini spent about a year in Turkey and the rest of his 14 years' absence in the Shi'ite religious city of Najaf in Iraq, where he developed his ideas in his writings. However, in 1978 he was thrown out of Iraq by Saddam Hussein, then vice-president, and went to France on a temporary visa. Taking the opportunity of the Shah's absence, he appeared in Iran on February 1979, announcing an alternative interim government against the provisional government under Shapour Bakhtiar. A majority of the army were in favor of Khomeini, because it was evident to the military high command that the *mullahs* were less dangerous than the militant working class. Severe repression of left-wing opponents was combined with a demagogic referendum, with the alternatives of the monarchy or an Islamic Republic. For the masses, the key issue was rejection of the monarchy. This

polar opposition enabled Khomeini to secure a 98 percent vote in favor of the Islamic Republic on March 30–1, 1979. A new era of revolution ensued in Iran. But this revolution had its own unique blend of highly intoxicating religiosity and conservatism on the one hand, and adjustment with modernity and international considerations on the other. Since 1963, Khomeini had been focusing on the legend of the Karbala, the most popular symbol of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in Shi'ism, and placing it in juxtaposition to the sufferings of the people under the Shah. In 680 AD Imam Hussain, the third Imam (a powerful religious leader), opposed the tyrannical rule of Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph, risking his own life. Depicting the Shah as Yazid, Khomeini rallied the charged-up people to attain this holy martyrdom.

The charismatic personality of Ayatollah Khomeini, combined with his reputation for leading the anti-Shah struggle, made him an attractive and respected leader of the revolution. He mobilized a social bloc including the traditional bourgeoisie, with its various factions, the large and medium-sized *bazaar* merchants and small manufacturers, a large petty bourgeoisie, and the plebeian masses, though the uprising of February 1979 was actually started without his support. In order not to be outflanked, he supported it after it had begun. His supporters then tried to demobilize the workers' *shoras*, to disarm the left, and to set up an Islamic regime. The White Revolution was undermining the hold of the Shi'ite clergy, and this was what had generated Khomeini's opposition. Hence, he had supported Mossadegh's overthrow, but had subsequently opposed imperialism's influence and the westernization of Iran, which struck a chord among the masses.

The Islamic Revolution was a major turning point in the modern history of Iran. It did not merely overthrow the monarchy but was designed from the outset to achieve a complete revolution, by the Islamization of all spheres of life. After long years of repression, the referendum was a free one, with all Iranians of 16 years and above eligible to vote. Thus, a democratic maneuver was used to impose the conservative solution. From the very outset, this revolution carried a striking dichotomy. Although it rejected the western model of democracy and liberalism, the regime established itself by popular election. And, above all, at one stroke the revolution

allowed all women to express their political opinions and technically to enjoy political equality alongside their male counterparts. But this was a token right and did not signify women's liberation in general. The state rather became even more repressive and authoritarian in regard to its women subjects.

The Islamic Regime

While Islam was the religion of the Iranians, not all of them saw Islam as the sole solution to their problems. Only 5,000 of the 70,000 villages had a permanent *mullah* presence in 1979. And they were connected to landowners. Peasants fought for and, in hundreds of villages, occupied land. Land reform legislation was stalled at the end of 1979, when *mullahs* like Ayatollah Golpayegani opposed it on the grounds that division of large landowners' land was contrary to Islamic principles. Thus, the radical socioeconomic dimensions of the Iranian Revolution were suppressed by using Islam as a unifying credo. The revolutionary credo *al-Islam buna al-hal* (Islam is the solution) embodied the alternative vision. But "Islam" is not a monolithic structure of thought and practice. The Iranian Revolution followed the Shi'ite variant of Islam. And here, too, there were multiple interpretations of the same religion. Khomeini's version of Shi'ism formed an innovative discourse.

His experimental model of a traditional Islamic brand of ideology led to a regime quite unprecedented in tradition. Beginning from a conventional religious standpoint, it reached very novel conclusions that were possible only in the modern political set-up of a nation-state. In many ways, the takeover of government was just the first phase. The revolution then had to prove that its dogma could cure society's ills, and this task became the main challenge for the revolutionary regime, especially during the Iran-Iraq War. Apparently, the revolution led to the unification of religion and state and the transfer of both theological and political power to the highest religious authority, the *marja'-al-taqlid* (the highest Shi'a authority), or *velayat-e faqih* (government of Islamic jurists). But problems developed at two levels. First, there was conflict between the philosophy of the revolution and the political interest of the Iranian state. Second, there were conceptual, factional, and personal conflicts among the revolutionaries themselves on

the questions of policies, power structure, and the succession issue at the end of Khomeini era.

Khomeini found in Islam the tool to contest and combat western political and cultural ideologies. He formulated his new ideas at a time of acute internal social distress. Peasants were running away from villages to town slums, and small businessmen were feeling threatened by wealthy entrepreneurs linked to the central government as well as by multinational corporations. Khomeini harped on the point of national security threatened by the Americans, and also on the Pahlavi (state) alternative of steady encroachment upon religious properties and institutions, especially seminaries, publishing houses, and landed endowments. At this juncture, when state was about to take over religion, Khomeini turned the situation upside down and it was religion that ultimately took over the state. In fact, in his book *Hokumat-e Islami: Velayat-e faqih* (Islamic Government: Authority of the Jurist), he claimed the supremacy of the clerical judges while denouncing monarchy as an alien institution imposed by various external forces. This claim for supreme leadership in political as well as religious decision-making made Khomeini the unquestionable supreme authority of the state.

The Khomeini brand of "fundamentalism" received diverse and contradictory explanations from various intellectual positions. According to Abrahamian (1993), the Khomeini regime was an experiment with populism as this term is associated with ideological adaptability and intellectual flexibility, with political protests against the established order, and with socioeconomic issues that fuel mass opposition to the status quo. "Fundamentalism," in contrast, implies religious inflexibility, the centrality of scriptural doctrinal principles, political traditionalism, and social conservatism. In other words, "fundamentalism" implies the rejection of the modern world, while "populism" connotes attempts made by nation-states to enter that world. Achcar (2006: 48–59) argues that fundamentalism had a distressed petty bourgeois social base, but distinguishes between nationalism with Islam as a component and fundamentalism, which sees Islam as an end in itself. It involves a form of reactionary "internationalism" that wants to go beyond the border of the country of its origin, opposing the US not because it is imperialist and Israel not because

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it is a Zionist usurper of Palestinian land but because the US is the “Great Satan” and Israel “the Jewish usurper of an Islamic holy land.”

In fact, the constitutional proposals saw a radical innovation. It was Khomeini who for the first time fused the two distinct yet overlapping positions of authority (political and religious) into one, by making the religious head the supreme political authority. The Islamic Revolution reached a new level of experimentation when Khomeini abolished the office of the Shah and brought political, ethical, cultural, and religious responsibilities under a new model of Islamic rule. After the success of the revolution, the task of rebuilding the state and running the government became the major practical objectives at hand. Khomeini upheld the view that the *faqih* (jurist-consult) had the right to act as a political ruler as part of common Shi’i political theory. But he had further extended the position of the *faqih* and transcended the traditional Islamic parameters of Shari’a (Islamic law). These ideas, held by Khomeini, emerged in writing Articles II and V of the Constitution of Iran in 1979. It was specifically claimed that in the absence of the *mahdi imam* (messiah), guardianship over the affairs of the community should be bestowed on the just *faqih*, who is pious, knowledgeable, courageous, and acceptable to the majority of the masses. If no *faqih* can achieve this majority, a leader or a leadership council composed of *faqih* meeting all the requirements would shoulder this responsibility. Thus a shift of emphasis from Shari’a to the *faqih* as the ultimate leader was a reinterpretation of the traditional idea of an Islamic state. The pragmatic political leadership sought to replace the age-old written texts. Khomeini’s stand was revolutionary even within the traditional parameters of Islam itself. While running the government, the Iranian Revolution, instead of sliding back toward tradition, started Islamizing western political ideas and institutions such as “republic,” “constitution,” “cabinet,” and “parliament.” And since final decision-making power remained with the leader, revolutionary policies remained fluid, divergent, often contradictory, and in constant quest for a balance between theoretical claims and the demands of the real world.

The constitution of the new revolutionary regime was prepared under the direct supervision of Khomeini. The text of the constitution with its 175 clauses began with the declaration that

the Islamic Republic was based on the “principal faiths” of the justice of God; the existence of one God and submission to his will; the divine message and its fundamental role in all human laws; and the concept of the “resurrection” and its role in human evolution. But the text also included a number of pragmatic clauses. It divided the government into the executive, headed by the president, supervising a highly centralized state; the judiciary, with powers to appoint district judges and review their verdicts; and the national parliament, elected through universal adult suffrage. Khomeini, who had opposed the Shah’s decision in 1963 to let women vote in local elections, now changed his stance and argued that to deprive women of the vote was un-Islamic. The constitution also contained many populist visions. It promised all citizens pensions, social security, unemployment benefits, disability pay, medical services, and free secondary as well as primary school education. It further promised to eradicate hoarding, usury, monopolies, unemployment, poverty, and social deprivation; provide interest-free loans; and utilize science and technology. Finally, the constitution declared that it would plan the economy in such a way that all individuals would have the time and opportunity to enhance their moral and social development.

Thus, Iran’s revolutionary constitution promised to make Iran fully independent, pay off external loans, cancel foreign concessions, nationalize foreign companies, and strive for the total unity of all Muslims. Despite Khomeini’s vehement rejection of “western” ideologies and practices, a number of ideas that he had reestablished within traditional Islamic vocabulary were actually borrowed from the West. He divided society into two opposite camps as the *mostazafin* (oppressed) and the *mostakberin* (oppressors), the *foqara* (poor) and the *sarvatmandan* (rich), and so on. The slogan of helping the world’s oppressed struggle against their oppressors had an overwhelmingly socialistic rhetoric. The constitution pledged to balance the government budget, encourage “home ownership,” and respect the predominance of the private sector in agriculture, trade, services, and small industries. Khomeinism thus mobilized the masses and played on their lived-reality issues in a radical-sounding rhetoric against the external powers and the ruling elite, carefully securing the right to private property. It claimed to be a return to

native roots and a means for eradicating cosmopolitan ideas, thereby showing a non-capitalist, non-communist “third way” toward development. The former USSR initially provided lip-service to the revolutionary endeavor in Iran as an anti-US, anti-capitalist movement. But Iran did not lean much on support from that quarter – nor did the USSR bend further to promote Cold War praxis to this area.

However, in reality, Khomeini had to pay much attention to running the revolutionary state, often compromising his theoretical premises. To run the vast array of social services, the Islamic Republic had no choice but to extend the large ministries and their regional departments. It had a system of *Komitehs* (local committees) and *Sepah-e-pasdaran* (loyal Islamic troops of the regime). To alleviate public discontent, it introduced food rationing and price controls and periodically launched campaigns against speculators, hoarders, and price-gougers. To administer the then recently nationalized enterprises, mostly confiscated from multinational corporations, the royal family, and their close associates, the new regime had to dramatically expand the bureaucratic machinery. Above all, the inherent contradiction between his populist rhetoric and his respect for private property created a double standard in Khomeini’s regime. The majority in the *majlis* (parliament), the “progressives,” attacked wealth, while the Guardian Council, the body with constitutional authority, ensured that all parliamentary bills conformed to the sacred law. In fact from 1981 to 1987, the Guardian Council vetoed some 100 reform bills as violations against the sanctity of private property, which included issues as important as land reforms, labor legislation, progressive income tax, and nationalization of foreign trade. Khomeini was reluctant to alienate his wealthy supporters, while deeming it inexpedient to immediately turn against the laboring classes. He was rather concerned about the support of the *bazaaris*, who were the economically proactive class as well as the commercially thriving section of society. As Islam’s main pillar of strength throughout Iranian history, this class was always very vocal in the state’s political affairs.

The model of state thrown up by the Islamic Revolution was one that respected private property but presented a version of “Third Worldism.” It talked of Islam as protecting the poor, but clearly marked itself off from any

genuine socialism. At the same time, through bank nationalizations (of mostly crisis-ridden banks), it portrayed itself as different from western liberal democratic models with a capitalist framework. It seemed most intriguing to discover Khomeini’s interest in observing May Day officially in Iran. May 1, 1979 was a major public festival in the Islamic Republic, which was openly hostile to Marxism and communism as an alien western ideological importation. However, the streets of Iran were flooded by people celebrating International Workers’ Day as well as freedom from the tradition of repressive monarchy from time immemorial. May Day had been an integral part of leftist tradition in Iran, and had been observed since 1921. But with the establishment of the Islamic Republic it was made a gala show as a ploy by the Khomeini regime to mobilize the urban working class and as much left supporters as possible under its hegemony, so that any threat from the secular left could be forestalled. The takeover of May Day was logically followed by the systematic elimination of the leftist parties one by one. In 1981, the Mojahedin, the National Front, and many Marxist groups were outlawed. In 1982, the authorities arrested members of the Tudeh Party on a mass scale. In the late 1980s, the regime shifted May Day celebrations from streets to confined spaces such as university campuses and sports stadiums, which also indicated the growing conservatism and skepticism of the revolutionary regime’s political outlook. Thus with the consolidation of the regime, the spirit of May Day was manipulated and narrowed down. But that it still remains alive in Iran evidences the deep-rooted existence and symbolic strength of the leftist tradition in modern Iran.

Alternatives and their Failures

Ahcar has described the Iranian Revolution as a “permanent revolution in reverse.” In origin it was a popular national democratic revolution with anti-despotic, anti-monarchic, and anti-imperialist stances, which was steadily pushed to the right by Islamic fundamentalists. Beginning as a national democratic revolution with a powerful proletarian component, it ended up by enacting extreme reactionary measures. Among the political forces that participated in the revolution were the Tudeh Party of Iran, the Iranian People’s Fedayeen guerillas, the Organization of

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People's Mojahedin of Iran, the National Front, the Freedom Movement, and pro-Khomeini clergy. From the beginning, tensions existed between these groups.

The victory of the February 1979 Revolution resulted in the emergence of a political atmosphere in which for the first time, after 25 years of repression and suppression of progressive forces by the Shah's regime, political parties and organizations were allowed to organize freely. The Tudeh Party of Iran was prominent among those. But it tended to support the Khomeini regime as "anti-imperialist." The Fedayeen and the Mojahedin were more opposed to the regime. In the Turkoman region, where members of the former ruling family held extensive land, peasant struggles to expropriate landowners were supported by the Fedayeen, and initially they fought the *pasdaran* to a standstill. But this uneasy equation between completely diverse ideologies could not last long. The Mojahedin, following a policy of aligning with one or other wing of the elite, sided with Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, who had fallen out with Khomeini, and started carrying out terrorist activities in 1980–1. Using this as an excuse, the regime cracked down on all opponents. The militant opponents were smashed first. Shortly thereafter, the Tudeh Party also found that Khomeini had no more need of it. As part of a general repression, prominent members of the party were imprisoned as Soviet spies. Almost 10,000 cadres were arrested and the party was declared illegal. By the time of Khomeini's death, all radical forces had been destroyed and every progressive issue for which the masses had fought in 1979 snatched away from them.

Khomeini's new experimental populism was deeply rooted in tradition, orthodoxy, and patriarchy. Although the revolutionary regime utilized women as a vote bank, it moved swiftly to push women back into domesticity soon after its consolidation. Both their private and public lives were affected. Laws and policies concerning women in revolutionary Iran were not only orthodox, they were also crafted in a misogynistic way and were therefore quite obviously derogatory to women. *Hijab* (the veil) was made mandatory in public places and use of cosmetics was restricted, with punishment for defiance ranging from whipping to imprisonment. Higher study was markedly restricted for women. They were not allowed to participate in sports, or even watch men play sports. Women also could not

travel or acquire a passport without the written permission of their male guardian (husband or father). Such endless restrictions came to women as a result of their vote for the revolution. The stipulation of equality for women was qualified in the constitution by adding that equality only went so far as Islamic law allowed. A series of new laws restricting women's mobility was passed between 1981 and 1983. Gender segregation started in the public transport system and even in educational institutions. The freedom of women performers was severely curbed. Women were being silently removed from important political positions and barred from participating in the judiciary. The case of Iran provides the classic example of the fact that the right to vote by itself cannot change or improve the position of women. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006) quite legitimately pointed out that women did not get a fair deal by the regime's fierce Islamization process. The more extreme steps included legalization of stoning to death for adultery, the annulment of the Family Protection Law of 1967 (and its 1975 amendments), which had abolished men's right to *talaq* (repudiation), restricted their right to polygamy, and placed men and women on a more or less equal legal footing in terms of access to divorce and custody rights, and the restoration in 1979 of the Shari'a in order to "protect the family" and realize women's "high status" in Islam. The legally approved marriageable age became 9, and polygamy was legalized.

Women did not accept this silently. When the new family courts presided over by Islamic judges started functioning, women were incredulous to learn that their husbands could divorce them without securing their consent. They started challenging the judges. Even after several years, voices of protest could still be heard. The enforcement of patriarchal *fiqh* (the science of jurisprudence) notions of marriage and divorce created such havoc in family life that eventually a series of reforms had to be brought in by the government, at least for those women who presented no overt challenge to the patriarchal ethos of the law as defined by classical Muslim jurists. To exercise his right to divorce, a man was told to either obtain his wife's consent or pay her substantial compensation. Rather than producing matrimonial harmony, the ostensible reason for the return to the Shari'a, the reality was increased marital breakdown.

Struggles Within the Islamic Camp

Stabilization of the regime was possible only after internal conflicts were resolved. With the consolidation of the clerical regime, significant differences within the revolutionary camp over the formulation of concrete policymaking and governance became more vivid within the inner core of Khomeini's power base. After Khomeini's death, this polarization and conflicts within the leadership increased even more as each party vied for ultimate political authority while dealing with social issues. The practical context did much to foment this tension within the leadership. Internally, the most serious difficulties included the struggle for power among the different groups in the revolutionary movement, socioeconomic challenges following the revolutionary takeover, and a substantial drop in oil income. Externally, post-revolution Iran faced a number of persistent troubles – tension with the United States and other western powers, the prolonged and indecisive Iran–Iraq War, and also the uneasy equation with most of Iran's immediate neighbors.

On September 22, 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. The US and its allies, in order to teach Iran a lesson, provided supplies to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Iraq also obtained its weaponry from the Soviet camp at one point. This destructive war, which caused a constant drain on money and manpower for the new Islamic state of Iran, ended with UN intervention in 1988. Khomeini died in 1989, leaving the future of the Iranian Revolution at an indecisive midway point.

SEE ALSO: Khomeini, Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Mussavi (1902–1989) and the Shi'ite Islamic Revolution; Mossadegh, Mohammad (1881–1967)

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