

# A REVOLUTION FULFILLED, OR BETRAYED? THE IDEOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

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*The Iranian Revolution is often portrayed as the black sheep of revolutionary history: a triumph of right wing reactionaries over a relatively progressive - albeit despotic - authoritarian regime, and the popular revolt that sought to overthrow him for a more traditionally democratic system. This paper challenges this narrative in depth, arguing that the development of the Iranian Revolution can only be properly understood and contextualized within an Islamic framework that acknowledges the nationalistic struggle against Western imperialism underlying all of twentieth century Iranian history. Similarly, the consolidation of power by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shi'ite ulama must be considered alongside the broader context of dissent and dialogue that characterize both the revolution's history, and Iran's present. While the present Islamic government remains unapologetically totalitarian, these factors nevertheless prove that the political plurality that led to the Shah's downfall remain a part of the revolutionary past, present, and future of Iran.*

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Revolutionary breaks from an established order are never the clean affairs history often portrays them to be in retrospect. But no revolution has so surprised, nor baffled, conventional analysis like the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s. Despite the rich and varied dynamics of Iran's political history, the revolution would consolidate a unique form of absolutist government: a theocratic republic rooted in Shi'ite Islam, with nominally modern democratic representative structures subordinated to an unelected executive council of clerics, and the supreme leadership of the religious Ayatollah. While theorists of various stripes have attempted to explain this outcome as the product of the exiled revolutionary theocrat Ayatollah Khomeini's unique influence, or the machinations of Shi'ite clerical hardliners, the origins of the Islamic Republic lay in the people of Iran themselves, and their long history of frustrated national ambitions at the hands of fundamentally alien impositions of Western ideas and systems that intensified

throughout the twentieth century. Thus, when considered in this context, the Iranian Revolution becomes the end product of a national effort to define Iran in truly Iranian terms; and while inarguably imperfect, the Islamic Republic should be viewed less as a victory of theocratic despotism over secular democracy, and instead as the Iranian emancipation from the monolithic idea of the West in and of itself.

The context of the Iranian revolution is often obscured by the strange insistence that its uniquely Islamic results need to be ‘explained’, particularly within the broader framework of revolutionary history and theory to which they seem largely at odds. The prominence of Islam as the defining basis of the revolution, as well as the implicit rejection of conventional left-right secular politics are treated as a unique feature that cannot be explained without special analysis. However, this assumption rests on a chauvinistic attitude that revolution is the province of the secular, Western tradition first and foremost. In fact, the antecedents of the 1979 revolution are deeply anti-Western and anti-colonial, and date back as early as the 1905-06 revolution against the Qajar dynasty: itself a response to increasing interference from European imperial powers in the economic and domestic affairs of what was then Persia.<sup>1</sup> The later collapse of the briefly democratic government of Mohammad Mossadeq’s National Front in 1953 at the hands of an American and British orchestrated coup, and the naked imperialism of both Old and New World powers throughout the twentieth century, only further demonstrated the threat foreign influence posed to Iranian self-determination.<sup>2</sup> The fact that these events remained a part of the socio-political fabric of Iran was clear in the actions of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi when he attempted to counter them through a combination of material, and identity politics that began with the White Revolution. Initiated in 1963, the primary aim was to bring the material benefits of the state’s alliance with the West to bear on the people, essentially buying their loyalty through prosperity.<sup>3</sup> While this had certain beneficial impacts on the urban middle classes, particularly those close to the Shah, it also increased inequality, particularly in rural agriculture where land was amassed by wealthy families at the price of small holders.<sup>4</sup> The reforms would also plant the first seeds of resentment within the ulama, who suffered from state appropriations of religious land.<sup>5</sup> This also created a large contingent of unemployed labourers, whose migration to urban centers in search of work resulted in expansive slums that surrounded Tehran and other cities by the 1970s: a potent reminder of the system’s inability to disperse its wealth

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, “Reconsidering the Iranian Revolution Forty Years Later.” *Current History* 118, no. 812 (2019): 343.

<sup>4</sup> Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 71-75.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 194-195.

equitably.<sup>6</sup> Combined with inflation and declining spending power, it was clear to Iranians that the ‘benefits’ of Western modernization were a far cry from what they had been promised.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Iran’s allies praised the regime as an exemplar of regional stability and prosperity<sup>8</sup>, which when considered with the Shah’s infamous 1971 celebration of 2500 years of Persian royal rule - of which he had no legitimate claim to whatsoever - served as a ready symbol of both the state’s disconnect with the people it served, and the Shah’s personal delusions of power and prestige.<sup>9</sup> With the many problems in Iran coalescing around the Shah, it was inevitable that he would become the focus of the coming revolution’s objectives. However, the common focus of Iranian’s ire was a deeper dissatisfaction with the repeated failures of western style modernization to produce genuine results for ordinary Iranians. The combined effects of 1905, Mossadeq, and finally the Shah, was that it created an undercurrent of desire for a truly Iranian state; a desire which would likewise give a critical advantage to one faction of the disparate revolutionary forces.

Understanding the outcome of the revolution requires a fundamental readjustment of our understanding of the ideological forces at play, and their origins in the unique landscape of Iran and its sociocultural and political history. Indeed, both the liberal and socialist opposition would fall victim to essentially the same fundamental mistake. In the case of the liberal National Front party, their attempts to spearhead calls for a liberal democracy proved too little too late, and were further undermined both by a lack of organization and resources, and an inability to maintain relevance as the revolution escalated.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Marxist and secular socialist groups such as the communist Tudeh party and the Fedayeen militants failed to make any significant headway outside of radicalized students and urban workers, and often competed unhelpfully against each other.<sup>11</sup> Both also suffered heavily at the hands of police and intelligence agency (the SAVAK secret police) repressions, even after the crackdowns were lessened on nominally peaceful groups such as the National Front.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, the religious establishment benefitted from its position at the most important junctions in the development of the revolutionary movement in Iran: the mosques, and the ideological work of the Iranian revolutionary sociologist and theorist Ali Shariati. Despite their post-revolutionary image as a monolithic

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Seeberg, “The Iranian Revolution, 1977-79: Interaction and Transformation.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 4, (2014): 487; Parsa, 141.

<sup>8</sup> G. Hossein Razi, “The Nexus of Legitimacy and Performance: The Lessons of the Iranian Revolution.” *Comparative Politics* 19, no. 4, (1987): 453.

<sup>9</sup> Seeberg, 487.

<sup>10</sup> Parsa, 186-187.

<sup>11</sup> Zohreh Bayatrizi, “From Marx to Giddens via Weber and Habermas: The politics of social thought in Iran.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 19, no. 4 (2016): 523; Parsa 180; Seeberg, 493.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 180, 183-184.

organization, the ulama of the 1960s and 1970s were a divided and factious group that played relatively little active role in fomenting revolutionary fervour.<sup>13</sup> In fact, outside of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini's agitation, the majority remained apolitical.<sup>14</sup> However, the mosques themselves became the lynchpin of revolutionary movements due to their relative safety from the regime's police apparatus, as well as a rallying point for the masses of disaffected labourers who increasingly formed the core of the revolutionary movement.<sup>15</sup> Within this environment, Ali Shariati's works would become the single most widely studied of the pre-revolutionary period. Combining influences from Marx to Bakunin to Sartre, along with anti-imperialism and Shia Islam, Shariati's philosophy formed the foundation of a truly indigenous Iranian ideology, based on a socialist reading of Islamic theology that advocated Islamic community (umma) as the basis of society.<sup>16</sup> The broad appeal of this socially minded, yet religiously evocative message created a climate in which nearly all Iranians could find common ground beyond simple opposition to the Shah.<sup>17</sup> These two components of Iran's revolutionary underground would not only provide the critical mass for the overthrow of the Shah, but also provide important context for the character of both the climax of the revolution, and the state building that followed.

The events of 1978 and 1979 that signaled the downfall of the Shah were more than the overthrow of a tyrant and his apparatus of oppression, in that they combined both symbolic and literal demonstrations of a popular judgement on the broader system of ideas and values that the Shah and his westernizing state represented. From the beginning of January 1978, the Shah's attempts to create a sense of popular legitimacy with pageants celebrating the White Revolution resulted in popular marches and prayer meetings at mosques that blatantly rejected the premise of endorsing the Shah's westernization program.<sup>18</sup> When protests turned violent after the death of a protester in Tabriz, the targets were explicit symbols of western influence on Iranian society: Western cinemas, boutiques, and banks.<sup>19</sup> As government repression turned deadly, the famous 40 day cycle began, where intervals between protests became standardized around the traditional period of Islamic mourning, following the death of a protester.<sup>20</sup> Thus civil disobedience developed a rhythm that both helped mobilize popular support, as well as further emphasize the implicit Islamic character of the protests and the movement itself.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 217-218.

<sup>14</sup> Baryatrizi. 218.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 190; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 343-344; Seeberg, 489.

<sup>16</sup> Bayatrizi, 523-524.

<sup>17</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi. 344-345.

<sup>18</sup> Seeberg, 489.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Karen Rasler, "Concessions, Repression, and Political Protest in the Iranian Revolution." *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (1996): 138; Seeberg, 490.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

In turn, when the Shah attempted to blame Islamists for the Abadan Cinema fire that killed 400 people, this was seen as a blatant provocation that further alienated the Shah from the protesters.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, his inconsistent pattern of police crackdowns, alongside later attempts at offering concessions and liberalization of the state led to a switch from defensive protests against state violence, to active demands for the abolition of the monarchy and the fundamental reorganization of the state.<sup>23</sup> As such, when repressions returned in November of 1978, all factions from white to blue collar workers, the bazaari merchant class, and religious organizations united behind the popular call for an end to the Shah's rule.<sup>24</sup> By the conclusion of the revolution against the Shah, over 12% of the population would directly participate in some form of popular action; and despite the underrepresentation of the rural population,<sup>25</sup> this share vastly exceeded the comparative percentages of both the French (2.5%) and Russian (1.5%) revolutions.<sup>26</sup> The result is that the Iranian revolution was never a battle between conventional ideological forces, united by convenience and circumstances to take down a common enemy; but instead a genuinely popular revolution rooted in a sociocultural landscape that implicitly rejected the premises of a culturally western, monarchal autocracy. In this sense, the outcome of the Iranian revolution was a foregone conclusion in that it would take on an Islamic character, since that was the implicit desire of the people from the outset. Thus, when evaluating the events that followed the departure of the Shah, and the state that arose in the place of monarchal Iran, they must be seen in this context.

In considering the organization of the post-revolution state of Iran, the 'victory' of the ulama, and the 'defeat' of liberal and socialist forces, can only be properly understood from within the framework of the Iranian Revolution itself. The initial confirmation of the Islamic nature of the Islamic Republic by referendum returned overwhelming support from nearly 90 percent of the eligible electorate.<sup>27</sup> While protested by several groups as undemocratic, the turnout demonstrated that Islamic governance of some kind was clearly the desire of the population. By the time the government had been established formally, it would attract strong criticism from the left, as religious requirements on elected representatives barred atheistic Marxists and many socialists from running for various offices, including president.<sup>28</sup> While the first Majlis (parliamentary) elections would reflect this handicapping of the clerics' main source of opposition,<sup>29</sup> the decline in voter turnout that began with the Majlis election and continued as crises compounded,

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<sup>22</sup> Seeberg, 490.

<sup>23</sup> Rasler, 146-148.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>25</sup> Parsa, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, 344.

<sup>27</sup> Parsa, 252.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 255-256.

led to a shift in both action and rhetoric towards the left by the government and the Ayatollah himself.<sup>30</sup> In the following years and decades since the revolution, the seemingly incompatible blend of democratic and Islamic principles that make up the Iranian state have created a comprehensive and effective welfare state that has largely eliminated illiteracy, and provides effective health and welfare programs.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, despite the often hegemonic depiction of the Iranian regime, the protests over electoral fraud in 2009 demonstrate that Iranians are more than capable of voicing dissent, and that the internal politics of Iran include substantive differences on the course the nation should take.<sup>32</sup> The endurance of the Islamic Republic, and of the imperfect political order it represents, is therefore a story of an evolving revolution in which political victory or defeat is a relative question. The only certainty is that this uniquely Iranian answer to the question of governance is far more deeply rooted and embraced by the people than the sum of its oft contradictory parts.

The Iranian Revolution is simultaneously an entirely singular event in history, while maintaining significant consistency with the broader themes of conventional revolutionary theory. It grew from very deeply rooted dissatisfaction with a system of governance that was as distant as it was oppressive to the national political and sociocultural aspirations of its people. In Iran, this was further compounded by the colonial dynamics which the country was constantly subjected to: imposed economic and cultural values, the priorities of powers and elites that ignored all popular input, and a government that never truly considered the people's wellbeing a priority. By the time the Shah's rule had collapsed, the revolutionary movement had encompassed a broader swathe of the population than any other popular revolt in history. The numerical scope of the revolution was matched only by the seeming diversity of its participants aims and goals. However, the common thread that underlay the ideological goals of every participant of the revolution was a rejection of the Western models and methods that had betrayed Iran's sovereignty and national culture to satisfy the interests of foreign powers and their ways. While it is inarguable that the new regime has been imperfect and excessive, and that many have suffered from the consolidation of the clerically dominated theocratic republic, Iran has achieved a genuinely revolutionary emancipation from its former international oppressors; and no people are better disposed to realize the potential their revolution still holds for the future, than the Iranians.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 257-258.

<sup>31</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, 346.

<sup>32</sup> Saïd Amir Arjomand, "Has Iran's Islamic Revolution Ended?" *Radical History Review* 105, (2009): 136-138.

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