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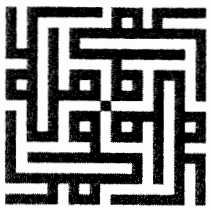

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IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1979. Like all great social upheavals, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was many years in the making. Its effects will resound throughout history. In simple terms, the regime of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown by a coalition of opposition forces dominated by Shīʿī Muslim fundamentalists. The acknowledged leader of the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989). The proximate causes of the revolution grew out of a complex interrelationship of social difficulties in Iranian society coupled with a breakdown in the personal health of the shah. However, in the minds of the people of the world the broad-based opposition between religious and secular forces was the central struggle of the revolution.

Although the specific events leading up to the ouster of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi took place over a period of approximately one year before his departure from Iran on 16 January, 1979, the social conditions underlying the revolution spanned several centuries. An understanding of these social conditions is necessary to fully appreciate the course of events and their historical significance.

Early Religious-Secular Conflict. The Ithnā ʿAsharī (Twelver) branch of Shīʿī Islam had been the official state religion in Iran since the founding of the Ṣafavid dynasty in the sixteenth century. Shāh Ismāʿīl, founder of the dynasty, claimed that he was a direct descendant of the prophet Muḥammad through the Shīʿī line of leaders of the faith, called imams. Almost from the beginning of Ṣafavid rule, religious officials criticized the court for laxity in observance of Islam.

The shahs of the nineteenth-century Qājār dynasty found themselves in difficult military and economic conflict with European powers. They faced growing criticism by the clergy over territorial losses, foreign economic penetration, and incompetent government.

Since there was no constitution in Iran, the public had no direct voice in major public policy decisions. Nevertheless, religious leaders became alarmed at the marketing of Iranian patrimony and launched a series of public protests that forced the shahs to modify their activity. This protest was not limited to Iran. It spread to all Islamic lands owing largely to the efforts of the reformer Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), an Iranian who began to preach Islamic revival and resistance to European powers starting in the 1870s. In Iran, the public protest culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, in which the Qājār monarch was forced to accept a constitution and a parliament. About twenty years later the dynasty collapsed. [*See* Qājār Dynasty *and the biography of Afghānī.*]

The rivalry between the new Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) and Khomeini had a long history. In 1921, Reza Khan, an army officer, emerged as a national leader in the tumultuous years following World War I. Ruhollah Khomeini was then entering theological studies in the shrine city of Qom south of Tehran. In 1926 Reza Khan formally crowned himself Reza Shah and established the Pahlavi dynasty. Khomeini was qualified as a mullah that same year.

Reza Shah ignored the new constitution and continued to rule by decree. Nevertheless, he launched a series of drastic reforms in Iranian life designed to modernize the nation. Reforms in dress, education, and law were far reaching. Many of the most drastic reforms were directed at the religious establishment. Religious institutions were placed under the control of the state, thus depriving the clergy of a major source of power and income. Many public protests, supported by the clergy against these reforms, were ruthlessly suppressed by the government.

In September 1941 Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by the Allied powers for his pro-German sentiments. He was succeeded by his young son, Muhammad Reza. At this time, Khomeini launched his first attack against the Pahlavi regime, denouncing their reforms with a tract entitled *Secrets Exposed*. Over the next thirty years Khomeini came to espouse the view that the mullahs should not just teach and advise; they should play an active role in governing the country to assure that religion would always serve as the basic guide to public life. In essence, the legitimate rule of the absent twelfth imam would be carried out by a *wilāyat al-faqīh* ("regency of the chief religious jurisprudent"), who would govern until his arrival on earth. This doctrine was controversial even among religious scholars. [*See* Wilāyat al-Faqīh.]

Khomeini continued to oppose the throne at every turn. In 1964 he was exiled by the shah for his public opposition to legislation that would exempt U.S. military personnel and their dependents from prosecution for any crime committed in Iran. He was already acclaimed as grand ayatollah at this time, a fact that prevented his outright execution. After seven months in Turkey, he settled in the Shīʿī holy city of Najaf, Iraq. From this location he continued to issue pronouncements against the Pahlavi regime to a growing group of supporters.

The National Front. Other secular oppositionists with claims to leadership also arose in the years following World War II. Chief among these was a coalition of parties known as the National Front, established in 1949 and led by Mohammad Mossadegh. No friend of the Pahlavis, Mossadegh had been a member of parliament at the time Reza Shah came to power in 1926 and had openly opposed ratifying him as shah. The National Front espoused many of the revolutionary ideals of the later Islamic reformers, such as limiting the powers of the shah and ending foreign domination. However, it did not advocate Islamic dominance of government.

The popularity of the National Front brought Mossadegh to power as prime minister in 1951. He came into conflict both with religious leaders and with the shah, who tried to oust him from office. The shah had underestimated his support, however, and was forced temporarily to flee. The United States and Great Britain, which had initiated the attempt to oust Mossadegh, largely because they feared communism in Iran, restored the shah to power two days later. This act established the United States as the chief foreign interventionist in Iranian affairs for all groups opposed to the monarchy.

Another important opposition group was the Mujāhidīn-i Khalq ("People's Warriors"), established in 1965 from other similar opposition groups. Their doctrine combined Islamic religious commitment with socialist doctrine. [*See* Mujāhidīn, *article on* Mujāhidīn-i Khalq.]

Prelude to Revolution. The United States continued active support of the shah. It anointed him as one of the protectors of Western interests in the Persian Gulf and sold Iran large supplies of advanced weaponry to support an increasingly powerful military sector. The shah, for his part, launched in 1963 a massive economic and social reform program known as the White Revolution that was designed to change every aspect of Iranian life. The program was predicated on fashionable Western economic models of the 1960s which promised economic "takeoff" if GNP growth could be sustained at 7 percent or better for a period of years. For Iran this growth was developed through a time-honored tradition: foreign investment in partnership with the throne and other economic elites.

In 1972 Britain withdrew its military from the Persian Gulf, and the United States began to arm Iran even more seriously. Then, in 1973 Iran and Saudi Arabia led the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in a massive price increase in crude oil. This gave Iran far more income to fuel both its military and economic development.

Following the oil price increase of 1973, Iran's economy began to reel out of control. GNP growth continued unabated, but the profits were limited only to the top echelons of society. The shah finally achieved the elusive goal which had been pursued since the days of the Qājār shahs—financial independence from the population as a whole. In 1959 oil revenues contributed only 9.7 percent of Iran's total GNP. By 1974, the share had risen to 47 percent, and by some estimates the government was receiving fully 80 percent of its revenues from oil by 1978. Since those in power were not elected, these funds gave them almost unlimited license in the exercise of their power.

Consequently, the shah and his largely technocratic ministries turned the nation into a private economic laboratory. Real advances were made in education and in the development of roads and public utilities. Nevertheless, life became uncomfortable, as the population was poked and prodded in interminable experiments to decrease inflation, increase productivity, and improve social indicators. The traditional population was shocked

by the sudden appearance of dress and public behavior that they deemed indecent. One noted social critic, ʿAlī Sharīʿatī (1933–1977), accused the regime of "Westoxication" *(gharbzadagī)* in the pursuit of Euro-American modernity at any social price. [*See the biography of Sharīʿatī.*]

By 1975 the increase in GNP topped 70 percent in real market prices, but inflation had begun to make itself felt at a rate exceeding 60 percent. In the next year the inflation rate topped the growth rate, causing negative real growth of about 2 percent. Agricultural production, lagging nearly 1 percent behind the birth rate (2.3 vs. 3.2 percent) went into real decline. For the first time in its history, Iran became a net importer of meat and grains. Ordinary Iranians, particularly those on fixed incomes, or on rigidly limited government salaries, were beginning to suffer. Housing costs were rising at yearly increments exceeding 100 percent. As a final blow, the new government of Jamshīd Amūzgār (August 1977) cut off the substantial subsidies to the clergy and religious institutions that had been instituted by the former prime minister, Amīr ʿAbbās Huvaydah. It is noteworthy that the shah in exile identified this act as the mistake that caused his downfall.

All of these acts alienated large sections of the traditional population. This gave the religious establishment its opening, and the revolutionary exhortations of Ayatollah Khomeini began to take hold throughout the population.

The Revolution. The beginning of the end for the shah began on 9 January 1978, when theology students in the city of Qom began a protest against a pseudonymous article published in the newspaper *Iṭṭilāʿāt* accusing Ayatollah Khomeini of licentious behavior and crimes against the state. The author was widely thought to have been Minister of Information Daryūsh Humāyūn. The demonstration met with violent confrontation by the police. Several students died. In accord with Islamic custom mourning ceremonies for the dead were held at forty-day intervals. Each of these mourning ceremonies turned into a public demonstration against the government, which was again confronted by the police or the military, resulting in more fatalities. Quite predictably the bulk of the protesters were young unemployed males in the large cities, and the protests were underwritten and financed from the traditional market, or bazaar.

Protests increased throughout the spring and summer. On 7 September 1978, the shah declared martial law and a ban on all demonstrations. Unfortunately, word of this decree had not spread. A demonstration at Jaleh Square in Tehran was confronted by the military, and a large number of defenseless people were shot. The government claimed that under a hundred people had died, but the religious establishment put the figure at over ten thousand. From this point onward, protests spread to every part of the nation. Even the state-controlled press began to report violence on a daily basis.

The shah seemed to have no definite strategy for dealing with the crisis. It was not generally known at the time that he was sick with lymphatic cancer. His illness was seen later as one cause of his irresoluteness in the face of these protests. Even so, he tried a number of tactics to diffuse the revolution. He changed prime ministers and arrested more than 130 former government leaders. Finally, he coerced Iraqi officials to expel Khomeini. The ayatollah eventually settled in a suburb of Paris, Neauphle-le-Château. He was better able to communicate with internal revolutionary forces from Paris by way of long-distance telephone than from Iraq.

Khomeini's central message was the same one that religious oppositionists had been preaching for a hundred years: the shah had conspired with foreign powers—primarily the United States—to once again exploit the Iranian people and undermine Islam. This message proved irresistable to the population as a whole. The revolution in its final months attracted broad-based participation, involving people from all economic classes and all regions of the country. Particularly crippling were strikes in Iran's oil industry, which brought exports to a near halt.

Eventually it became clear to the shah that he must leave Iran if stability were to be preserved. He attempted to appoint a number of individuals to become prime minister in a caretaker role, but all refused. Finally, Shahpour Bakhtiar (Shāpūr Bakhtiyār), a venerable National Front politician, accepted the job in order to allow the shah to leave. On 16 January 1979, the shah left Iran. The United States dispatched General Robert Huyser to Tehran to ensure the support of the Iranian military for the Bakhtiar government.

However, the Bakhtiar government was doomed from the start, as Khomeini appointed his own Provisional Revolutionary Government headed by another National Front politician, Mehdi Bāzargān. Bakhtiar never had any power. The real power during January and February of 1979 resided in roving *komitehs* (committees) of revolutionaries organized in mosques. These groups, in

conjunction with veteran guerrilla fighters, such as the Mujāhidīn-i Khalq, ruled the streets of Tehran and other large cities. They engaged in periodic skirmishes with the military and other loyalist groups during this period. [*See* Komiteh; *and the biography of Bāzargān.*]

Khomeini returned to Iran on 1 February 1979. His return was greeted with extraordinary enthusiasm throughout the nation. On his return, sections of the military began to defect to the new Khomeini-led government. Tension between military groups climaxed on 9 February 1979, in a clash between air force cadets and technicians who had declared their loyalty to Khomeini and the shah's Imperial Guards. The cadets tried to take over the air force base at Doshan Tapah on the outskirts of Tehran and were opposed by the Imperial Guard. The cadets won the battle with the help of urban guerrillas in the area. This touched off a series of armed confrontations throughout the capital. On 11 February the Supreme Military Council announced that the military would no longer participate in the political crisis. All soldiers were ordered to their barracks. Bakhtiar went into hiding and eventually fled to Paris. The Khomeini-led government was officially in power. February 11 is now marked as the anniversary of the revolution.

The Aftermath of the Revolution. February to November 1979 was a transitional period in which the religious leaders fully established themselves in power in Iran. The Provisional Revolutionary Government established by Khomeini consisted largely of noncleric National Front leaders. These leaders envisioned the successor government as a secular democracy based on European models. However, hard-line religionists had a different vision. They favored an outright theocracy based on Islamic law.

On 30–31 March the Provisional Revolutionary Government held a national referendum on the form the new government would take. At Khomeini's insistence, the public was asked to vote yes or no on whether Iran should become an Islamic republic. Official tallies placed the yes vote at 98 percent.

The nation next decided on a constitution for the new government. In the summer of 1979 two drafts of a constitution were put forth, neither giving power to Khomeini or the clerical leaders. There was great debate between hard-line Islamists and secular nationalists. Eventually as a compromise an Assembly of Experts was elected to draft a third constitution. The assembly had heavy representation from religious hard-liners. This third draft invested ultimate power in a *faqīh* (chief jurisprudent) along with a five-person religious Council of Guardians. Great dissent over this document raged in Iran throughout the fall. The secular National Front leaders were chief in their opposition, fearing, as Bāzargān asserted, a new "dictatorship of the clergy."

Fate intervened in the ratification process to sway public opinion in favor of the hard-line religious leaders. The former shah, who was now deathly ill, had been traveling from nation to nation looking for a place to live. He appealed to the United States for medical treatment. Despite dire warnings from the U.S. embassy in Tehran of the dangerous consequences of admitting him to America, the Carter administration allowed him to fly to New York on 22 October 1979.

The reaction in Tehran was not long in coming. On 4 November a group of students took over the U.S. embassy and held all personnel hostage. The Americans remained captive for 444 days. The capture of the embassy touched off a huge anti-American reaction in Tehran that lasted for months. Officials of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, notably Bāzargān, were blamed for the decision to give refuge to the shah and were forced to resign. These events effectively blunted all secular nationalist opposition to the establishment of a theocratic government with Khomeini at its head. On 2–3 December 1979, the nation accepted the new constitution with a 99 percent approval vote.

In the ten years from the onset of the revolution until Khomeini's death on 3 June 1989, the new government groped toward stability. Despite continued infighting between political factions, internal political transitions were generally peaceful. A debilitating war with Iraq, begun in September 1980, was fought to a standstill by July 1988. The continued power of the *komitehs* and their successors, the Sipāh-i Pasdarān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, were cause for public alarm. These groups continued to enforce a rough-and-ready Islamic morality along with keeping the peace. Those seen as offenders of Islamic codes of modesty and morality, as well as adherents of the former regime, were accosted on the streets and summarily presented before Islamic judges. Many were executed or imprisoned. Eventually the actions of these vigilante groups were curtailed, as they were redirected to fight the war with Iraq. The new government continued to be hostile toward the United States, but it improved relations with most other nations. [*See* Sipāh-i Pasdarān-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī.]

For people throughout the Islamic world, the Iranian

Revolution was a symbolically important event. It demonstrated that a Western-influenced secular regime could be overthrown by opposition forces organized under Islamic reformers. Since Islamic revivalists had been advocating just such a change since the late nineteenth century without success, the revolution gave new impetus to their struggle and triggered a rise in Islamic fundamentalist activities from Morocco to Southeast Asia.

It is safe to say that, although the dynamic tensions for opposition to the monarchy had long existed in Iran, no one could have predicted for certain that the final outcome of the revolution would be a theocratic government. For Muslims eager for reform and escape from Western domination, both in Iran and in other nations, the revolution was a deeply inspirational event. For secular nationalists and most of the Western world, the revolution continues to be disturbing. Throughout the entire period, however, the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini dominated the scene. He is correctly identified as the author of the revolution.

[*See also* Iran; Revolution; *and the biography of Khomeini. For biographies of Reza Shah and Muhammad Reza Shah, see under Pahlavi.*]

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