

# The Iranian Revolution

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A political revolution consists of an inherent change in the dynamics of power and is motivated by several factors that ultimately result in a change within the cultural, economic and socio-political structures of a state. Mehran Kamrava's *Modern Middle East* further elaborates on the nature of revolutions by providing a classification and argues that there are four types of revolution. For instance, revolution can be planned, negotiated or a movement that is instigated from the upper echelon of a political structure (Kamrava, 96). The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 by the course of its materialization was a revolution which was spontaneous in nature and fundamentally altered the political structure and ideology of Iran.

As identified by Kamrava and the procession of events in Iranian history, the central causes of the revolution were public frustration over mounting rates of unemployment, deteriorating economic conditions as a result of the 1973 oil crisis, as well as resentment towards a political system that was inherently corrupt and primarily favoured the merchant class of Iran (99). An increasing dissatisfaction with Shah Pahlavi's inefficient and oppressive regime inevitably led to mass demonstrations against him and due to the fact that the religious clergy was the most influential, respected and organized political opposition to the monarchy, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who became the central opponent to the Shah and assumed the role of the revolutionary leader. It is most important to note that an analysis of the Iranian Revolution also puts into perspective the ramifications of the revolution on the current political attitude and structure of Iran as well as on its relations with other states.

Prior to examining the direct causes of the revolution, it is important to understand the political background of Iran between the years 1950 and 1979. At this time, Iran was a unique state in the Middle East largely because it did not experience the rule of the Ottomans and neither did it experience large degrees of external intervention in its affairs. However, the nationalist rhetoric that was adopted by many states in the Middle East was also adopted in Iran under the administration of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was elected into office in 1951 at a time when the United States and the United Kingdom were becoming increasingly interested in Iran's oil reserves (102). Mosaddegh, who was the leader of the National Front Party, conducted an election campaign on the basis of opposition to foreign presence in Iran. Mosaddegh was ultimately elected on the basis of the party's oil policy, which called for the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian oil companies so that the revenue generated from the oil would be received by Iran instead of foreign companies. This policy was very popular with Iranians, largely because it was in tune with nationalist sentiment of the period. The British, however, responded by placing an oil embargo on Iran which prohibited the country from exporting any oil produced in the formerly British controlled companies. British ships were also sent to the Persian Gulf in order to enforce the embargo and the de facto economic sanctions resulted in the emergence of an economic crisis in Iran since oil was the largest source of revenue for the Iranian economy (104).

Foreign intervention did not halt at the juncture of imposing economic sanctions however; a coup was carried out against Mosaddegh's administration in 1953 that was orchestrated by the Iranian army, the American CIA and the British MI6 in a venture called Operation Ajax. The Iranian military did not favour Mosaddegh's nationalist agenda and as such requested for aid from the United States and the United Kingdom to remove the elected

administration. In response, the CIA approved the expenditure of \$1 million in order to orchestrate the coup and initiated a propaganda campaign against Mosaddegh in Tehran, organized by both American and British intelligence officials. The Shah had been in exile since the election of Mosaddegh in 1951 but was returned by the Americans and the British in the aftermath of the coup, largely because he was not in opposition to foreign interests in Iran. In the direct aftermath of the coup, he resumed trading oil with foreign companies and, more significantly, the United States and the United Kingdom protected their interests in the region by directly intervening in Iran and thus subduing the threat of the expansion of nationalism in the Middle East (110). The direct foreign intervention in the form of the coup cultivated the seeds for initial public opposition to the Shah's rule and mass uprisings against the monarch took place throughout the 1960s due to the fact that a democratically elected leader was deposed by external actors and the Shah now catered to the interest of those actors instead to those of the Iranian people.

The central causes that led to the materialization of the revolution included high unemployment rates, worsening economic conditions and the inherent corrupt nature of the monarchy, which favoured the elite merchant class both politically and economically. The Bazaar elite class, which was Iran's merchant class, supported the Shah *en masse* because it benefited the most from the political structure. The Shah's economic policies were ambitious in nature but proved to be inefficient in the light of the 1973 economic crisis, which greatly affected the Iranian economy. The 1973 oil crisis was initiated after members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Companies (OAPEC) declared an oil embargo as a war tactic during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War (115). As a direct result of the embargo, the price of oil rose dramatically and the ensuing economic shock had a detrimental effect on the economic systems of many

states, including Iran, which was an oil-generating country. As a result of the oil crisis, rates of unemployment increased in Iran and the overall economic health of the country worsened, which primarily affected the urban and rural class of the country. Additionally, the Shah's efforts to secularize and Westernize Iran did not benefit the lower middle class and drew public criticisms from both the urban middle class and the rural class, as well as the religious factions of the country, who perceived the Shah's political and economic policies as efforts to de-Islamize Iran (124).

The larger sentiment within Iran amidst worsening economic conditions was that the political structure was inherently inefficient and that the Shah's policies only benefited the elite class who continued to prosper economically under the monarchy. The Shah sustained the wealth and political influence of the Bazaar elite class through channels of corruption and nepotism and this overt favouring of the elites increasingly alienated most of the Iranian population, particularly the rural population residing outside Tehran. It was also the rural population of the country that was most influenced by religious factions in Iran because the religious clergy in Iran was an influential and increasingly respected political entity. It was Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shiite cleric and a prominent charismatic religious leader, who had already organized opposition against the Shah during the White Revolution in 1963. The opposition was based on the rhetoric of political reformation that would allow religious minorities to hold positions of political power and ultimately popularized anti-Western and anti-Shah sentiments throughout Iran. Khomeini's incitation of the demonstrations ultimately led to the exile of the religious cleric in 1964 to Paris (132).

The most significant factor that put Khomeini into the position of being the central opponent to the Shah in 1979 was the fact that the religious figure translated the concerns of the

religious factions in Iran into larger political and economic concerns that affected the whole Iranian population. Khomeini's political influence over large portions of the Iranian population was showcased by the fact that the religious leader's political influence increased while he was in exile and his political sermons, which denounced the Shah and the monarchy's relations with the US, were smuggled into Iran. This form of propaganda proved to be extremely efficient because Khomeini continued to gain political notoriety despite being in exile for over a decade. It is also important to note that not all groups and individuals who opposed the Shah were necessarily followers of Khomeini, yet Khomeini was intelligent enough to capitalize on the fact that there was no organized political opposition against the Shah.

Consequently, the combination of high unemployment rates, overall worsening economic conditions, political corruption and a strong religious clergy who formed an opposition to the monarchy culminated in the development of the 1978 street protests against the Shah and Iran's political structure (136). The street protests of 1978 were spontaneous demonstrations in opposition to the political system in order to demand state accountability which later intensified and led to the expulsion of the Shah. The main participants of the initial street protests were students, the urban class, the rural class and religious factions. The main point of opposition was to the Shah's economic policies that continued to strengthen the merchant elite class while the rest of Iran faced worsening economic conditions and increasing unemployment rates.

The demonstrations were ruthlessly suppressed by the Shah through the use of SAVAK, which was the domestic security and intelligence service established by the Shah. Trained and armed by the United States, SAVAK forces attacked street protestors and captured any opponents of the regime, which in turn increased opposition against the Shah and the United States (142). The street protests were no longer only about the state's economic policies but

rather reflected a fervent desire for political change which could only be satisfied through the expulsion of the Shah. After the initiation of violence by the Shah, the protestors attacked any and all symbols that were linked to the Shah or foreign interveners, which included the destruction of businesses. In response, the regime's suppression of the protests intensified.

However, as highlighted in the introductory paragraph, the combination of worsening economic conditions, political nepotism, and corruption, the increasing influence of the religious clergy as well as the emergence of vibrant protestors proved to be a lethal cocktail for the Shah's regime. In February of 1979 the Iranian Islamic Revolution proved to be successful and Ayatollah Khomeini was given the role of being the leader of the revolution, primarily due to the fact that there was an absence of another organized political leader. The Shah fled to Japan and Khomeini finally returned to Iran after being in exile for 15 years and was jubilantly welcomed in Iran by the people. Iran was officially declared an Islamic Republic in 1979, and the state became a theocracy in practice, demonstrated by the fact that the Quran was designated to be the constitution of the country (150).

The Iranian Revolution immediately and fundamentally altered Iran's political relations with its neighbouring states as well as its traditional allies. Right on the heels of the Shah's expulsion and the eradication of the monarchy, the hostage crisis that lasted 444 days took place and ultimately soured the political relations between Iran and the United States, the implications of which still affect current political relations between the two states. After the revolution there was a populist pressure to have the Shah return to Iran in order to face charges of war crimes committed by the monarchy and SAVAK during the street protests in 1978, but this demand was refused both by the Shah and the United States. The continuation of US support for the Shah fed the frustration of the Iranian public and resulted in the targeting of the US embassy in Iran in

November of 1979 in which 90 students stormed the embassy and took 66 Americans hostage for 444 days. The hostage situation, although not directly orchestrated by Khomeini and the new regime, was not denounced by Khomeini either and most of the individuals who took part in the hostage crisis were avid supporters of Khomeini. President Reagan ultimately negotiated the deal for the return of the hostages in exchange of the provision of arms to Iran, however this crisis proved to be pivotal because the political relationship between the US and Iran turned extremely hostile. This was showcased by the severing of direct bilateral diplomatic relations between the two states, including the closure of the US embassy in Iran after the hostage crisis in 1979.

At the same time Iran was severing political ties with the United States the country entered a war with Iraq almost immediately after the revolution. The 1980 Iran-Iraq War took place due to several factors which included the longstanding border dispute over the Shatt al-Arab river that both countries claimed as their own (159). The region around the river was fertile and the waterway was also strategic in terms of a channel for oil exportation. The population in the region was constituted of both Iraqis and Iranians which further complicated the land claims. Another crucial factor behind the initiation of the war was based on the fear of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that the revolution in Iran might also encourage the Shiite population in Iraq (which is approximately 60% of the total population) to instigate their own revolution. Saddam's Baathist party was secular and nationalist in nature and any form of religious politics was not tolerated by the regime. As such, the rise of Khomeini and the establishment of a theocracy posed a direct threat to Saddam's political power. Additionally, Saddam wished to fulfill the role of the regional hegemon and it was assumed that Iran's military opposed Khomeini and was clearly fragile in the direct aftermath of political instability.

However, it is crucial to note that Iraq's assumptions about Iran's military state were completely false because the Islamic Republic now had a new *raison d'être* which included political activism. Iraq's invasion increased mass domestic support for Khomeini because just like the United States and the Shah, Iraq represented anti-Islamic and pro-Western sentiments. With the possession of mass domestic support, Khomeini organized a collective military response to the Iraqi invasion and the war proved to be a stalemate between the states. In the period between 1980 and 1988, more than one million Iranians and Iraqis lost their lives, which included the 1988 Iraqi regime gassing of 5000 Iraqi Kurds who were seeking political autonomy. It is also important to note that throughout the war the United States and the Soviets supported both Iran and Iraq in order to make sure that neither party gained too much political influence, which would threaten Israel's regional hegemony.

The central causes of the Iranian Islamic Revolution have been discussed in explicit detail; however, it is also important to analyze the political ramifications of the revolution. The revolution was perceived to be a threat by the US, specifically because the Cold War had not yet ended. The larger perception was that if Iran was not politically allied with the US any longer then the only other alternative would be to be allied with the USSR, which would raise direct obstacles to US and neoliberal Western political and economic interests in the region. There was also the fear in the US that Iran might incite anti-American sentiments in neighbouring states and that it might become an exporter of theocratic and religious-based political movements to states like Saudi Arabia. However, the US did not take into account the fact that Khomeini was a Shiite cleric and that the religious-based political movement that took place in Iran could not possibly take place in every country that mainly adhered to Islam because of the sectarian diversity in the region. The perception that Iran was a political threat largely emerged from the notion that Iran



was a success story of a theocratic revolution and because of this reality it had the potential to become a leader in the instigation of similarly anti-American, anti-Western, religious movements in regional monarchies who sustain Western interests in the region. This fear was realized in Iran's strong relations with Syria despite varying religious outlooks, as well as in the special relationship with Ghadaffi's Libya, which also shared Iran's anti-Western rhetoric. Additionally, Iran's political and financial support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, a Shiite militant group, further fueled the foreign perception that Iran actively sought to export its theocratic revolution to other areas in the region. In contrast, the Iranian perception of its revolution is one of an alternative vision to both capitalism and communism and it is a narrative of survival against global sanctions and political isolation. The rhetoric ascribed to by the Iranians is that a state can survive politically and economically as the enemy of the United States and, despite being a rogue state, it has set an example for other political systems who also wish to adopt an anti-interventionist rhetoric.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 has also had profound ramifications on the current political attitude and structure of Iran, which still principally adheres to the theocratic tenets laid out by Khomeini after the revolution. The political power still lies in the hands of Ali Khamenei, who took over the role of the Supreme Leader of Iran after the death of Khomeini in 1989, which also includes the roles of the head of state and the highest ranking political and religious authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The political structure of Iran is still predominantly traditional in nature, however it is also important to note that an increasing degree of reformist rhetoric has also come into play into Iranian politics largely in an effort to fight the US and Western economic sanctions placed on the country in response to perceived Iranian nuclear aggression. The sanctions have crippled the state's economic functions and although the

reformers still adhere to the theocratic principles of the Islamic Republic, they also advocate for the relaxation of some aspects of the state's anti-Western policies that had been exacerbated under the administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2013. The current President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, is a reformist who has initiated nuclear talks with five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5 +1) in an effort to establish the point that Iran's nuclear program is being developed for energy purposes only. The talks have marked a turning point in Iran's relations with the United States and other Western states in an effort to re-establish diplomatic ties that will result in the easing of economic sanctions placed on Iran.

In the end, the central factors that caused the materialization of the Iranian Islamic Revolution were public dissatisfaction with the increasing rates of unemployment and worsening economic conditions in the country in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. Additional central factors were the inherently corrupt nature of the political system, which lacked accountability and favoured the merchant class that continued to prosper in times of economic crisis. The opposition to the Shah was mobilized in 1979 by the religious clergy of the country, with Khomeini holding the reins, largely because the religious factions were the most influential, respected and organized political opponents to the Shah's political structure. The political ramifications of the Iranian Revolution were profound because it altered Iran's political relations with neighbouring states like Iraq as well as traditional allies like the United States. The revolution also inherently altered the political ideology and structure of Iranian politics, which continues to be reflected in the country's political attitude and policies.

## Bibliography

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