The Iranian Revolution, which occurred between 1978 and 1979, has been called the last major revolution of the twentieth century. It marked the end of the rule of monarch Reza Shah Pahlevi and the beginning of the establishment of a theocratic state in Iran. It was urban based, meaning that many of the revolutionary groups were from the city and not peasants from the periphery. The main political instruments that brought down the shah's regime were strikes and mass demonstrations and not a concerted military action. Although the overarching ideology of the revolution was that of Shiʿite Islam cloaked in third-world sentiments, it was in actuality a multiclass coalition of widely disparate groups, from liberal nationalists to Islamic radicals, that finally overthrew the shah. The anti-shah movement was also largely detached from the international context, with little direct military or political support from outside Iran. The Iranian Revolution was so spontaneous and unexpected that it took many analysts and observers by surprise. In fact, as late as August and September of 1978, U.S. intelligence reports still indicated that opposition groups did not pose a threat to the shah's regime.

The Failure of the Pahlevi Regime

The shah's autocratic rule is widely viewed to be an important factor contributing to the rise of revolutionary action. The shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, maintained total control over the Majlis (national assembly), the cabinet, the bureaucracy, and Iran's political parties. Restricted freedom, arbitrary decisions, and political repression by the Ministry of Security (known as SAVAK), as well as widespread corruption, cronyism, and bureaucratic inefficiency, are all cited by many observers as the ultimate forces that finally led to the downfall of the shah.

In addition, the Pahlevi dynasty's claim to legitimacy was irreparably damaged after the August 1953 coup, which was organized by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and British intelligence, overthrew the democratically elected government of then–prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and reinstated the young shah to the throne. In the mid-1970s, human rights organizations and the Western press started a campaign against violations of human rights in Iran and criticized the shah for the mistreatment of political prisoners. The administration of U.S. president Jimmy Carter sought to compel the shah to be more observant
of human rights, but hoped to avoid destabilizing Iran or jeopardizing the close ties between the two countries. Responding to increasing criticism, the shah decided to permit a limited amount of public discourse. Unfortunately, the public perceived the shah's liberalization process as a sign of weakness. Further exacerbating the situation was the shah's massive modernization program (the so-called White Revolution of 1962) and his embrace of westernization, both of which alienated large parts of Iranian society. The White Revolution embodied a variety of economic and social initiatives, including land reform, public ownership of industries, enfranchisement of women, profit-sharing for workers, and a literacy corps to implement compulsory education in rural areas. However, it was opposed by landowners, who were afraid that they would lose the main source of their wealth, and by the ulema, who were alarmed by the spread of secular education and the propagation of anti-Islamic values.

Heedless of his subjects' growing dissatisfaction, the shah set forth to westernize Iranian society, patterning it along American lines. This process of the Americanization of Iranian society was undertaken with the help of American planners. Military personnel and U.S. advisors were granted legal latitude so broad as to constitute personal immunity from prosecution. The shah failed to realize that his plans for modernization, intended to foster a political environment capable of sustaining the nation's political and economic growth, neglected to recognize the importance of religion and culture in Iranian society.

**The Rise of the Ayatollah**

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denounced the shah's modernization program, focusing his attacks on the new electoral law enfranchising women and the referendum that endorsed the White Revolution. He declared the new electoral law un-Islamic and the referendum unconstitutional. Khomeini called upon his followers to protest, leading to the riots that erupted in 1963, but such public demonstrations were brutally crushed by the shah. Khomeini was arrested and detained in Tehran for two months. In late 1964, when the shah extended diplomatic immunity to his American military advisors, Khomeini accused the ruler of betraying Iran and endangering Islam.

This time Khomeini was deported to Turkey, from where he subsequently moved to the holy city of Najaf, in Iraq. In his years in exile he continued to attack the shah’s policies, denounced the whole institution of monarchy, confronted the religious establishment through a series of lectures condemning the ulema as apolitical, and organized his growing cadre of supporters. It was during those years that he produced his most famous handbook, *Velayat-e faqih hokumat-e Islami* (The jurist's guardianship: Islamic government), in which he argued that the shah’s monarchy was incompatible with Islam and that true Muslims must strive for an Islamic government under the leadership of the *faqih*, or Muslim jurist. In the early 1970s, Khomeini moved to Paris, which had a growing population of Iranian expatriots. There he gathered other exiled opposition leaders around him.

Two social groups were very much disaffected by the shah’s rule/policies, the *bazaaris* (merchants) and the ulema. These established close ties with one another, and proved to be a formidable alliance, in which the *bazaaris* provided financial support to the ulema through the
payment of tithes. In return for this financial support, the religious community provided the leadership and organizational backbone for the antigovernment alliance.

Iran's estimated 8,000 mosques provided an efficient nationwide communication network. The mosques served as centers for dissent, political organization, agitation, and sanctuary. In this context, revolutionary Shiʿite Islam was rapidly transformed into a discursive ideology that transcended class differences and social divisions and provided an effective channel of communication between dissident leaders and their followers. When the shah's minister of information planted an article in a daily newspaper attacking Khomeini and attempting to discredit him, protesting religious students in Qom staged sit-ins, which in turn led to violent repression from the shah. Some time later, several hundred demonstrators were killed during the government suppression of non-violent protests, an event that came to be known as the "Black Friday massacre" and "Jahleh square massacre."

The deaths of the demonstrators were used to inspire a further round of protests. Mourning processions were staged to commemorate the protestors, hailing them as heroes and martyrs. Ayatollah Khomeini himself was viewed by many as the charismatic leader and provided the inspiration for the revolutionary movement. He was one of half a dozen Shiʿite marja-e taqlid (source of emulation), a position that permitted him to widely publicize his views, but it was his pre-exile vehemence against the shah that garnered him his most fervent followers. Indeed, his vehement political stand against the shah, which led to his exile in 1964. Khomeini was also credited with expounding the theory of government that claimed that during the Mahdi's absence the community could only be governed by a velayat-e faqih. He could be the only person to execute God's will on behalf of the Hidden Imam, an agency with the mandate to rule both politically and spiritually. His conceptual reformulation of the originally quietist precept was innovative.

Postrevolutionary Government

Although antimodernization and anti-Western sentiment played an important role in the downfall of the Pahlevi dynasty, economic factors were also important. Industrial development did take place in Iran, but it proceeded very unevenly and was dependent on the state, oil revenues, and external technology. The oil sector expanded or contracted primarily in response to the world market, rather than to domestic economic needs. Partially as a result of this, Iran experienced a phase of hyperinflation, growing unemployment, a rising cost of living, and an erosion of business confidence. All of this resulted in a decline in private investment and in massive capital flight, totaling more than $100 million a month in 1975 and 1976. Strikes by oil workers and bank employees further devastated the economy of the shah's regime.

In the aftermath of the revolution, the political situation was inflamed by the struggle between secular and religious forces, by the existence of rival bases of power, and the emergence of autonomous revolutionary organizations. As the central state disintegrated, local, self-appointed committees (komiteshs) were formed to carry out the basic tasks of security and administration. In February 1979, revolutionary tribunals staffed by religious judges were set up to pass sentence on former officials of the shah's regime, as well as on private individuals who were accused of counterrevolutionary activities. In May 1979, Khomeini ordered the formation
of the *Pasdaran*, an armed force that was distinct from the regular army and deployed against opponents of the revolution. In an attempt to provide an organizational structure to the ideology of the Islamic revolution, a group of *ayatollahs* close to Khomeini formed the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) in mid-1979. The IRP sought to mobilize popular support for the Islamic Republic and to discredit the secular moderates.

The religious forces, led by Khomeini, used political maneuvering, propaganda, and terror to eliminate all opposition. The *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (an anticlerical opposition organization) were forced underground, and members of the Tudeh Party (Labor-Communist Party) and the *Fedayin-e Islam* (Devotees of Islam, a religio-political organization) were either jailed or executed. Throughout this period of consolidation, clerics and their supporters effectively eliminated the secular nationalist faction and other opponents to their rule. The chaotic postrevolutionary situation was ultimately clarified by a national referendum on the future of Iran that resulted in an overwhelming victory for Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic Republic. Elections for a Constituent Assembly charged with drafting a constitution for the Islamic Republic were also won by Khomeini's supporters and further consolidated the authority of the religious forces. The resultant constitution institutionalized the principle of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule by a supreme religious leader). The constitution also created a 270-seat Majlis to write and pass new laws subject to the *faqih*’s (that is, Khomeini’s) approval. The Assembly of Experts—an elected body of seventy to eighty eminent Islamic scholars—was made responsible for such high matters of state as revising the constitution and selecting a successor to the *faqih*. A twelve-member Council of Guardian, selected by the *faqih* and the Majlis, was created to screen and, if necessary, modify all legislation issued from the Majlis before passing it on to the *faqih* for his approval, and to ensure that all candidates for Iran’s newly established presidency possessed the proper Islamic credentials. It is the *faqih* and the Majlis that select the members of the council. The first presidential and legislative elections were held in early 1980, and again resulted in sweeping victories for Khomeini’s handpicked candidates.

-- Kristian P. Alexander

**FURTHER READINGS**

- **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

