

The Iranian Revolution of February 1979

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The revolution of February 1979 was a revolt of the society against the state. In some of its basic characteristics, the revolution did not conform to the usual norms of Western revolutions, because the state did not represent just an ordinary dictatorship but an absolute and arbitrary system that lacked political legitimacy and a social base virtually across the whole of the society.

This became a puzzle to some in the West, resulting in their disappointment and disillusionment within the first few years of the revolution's triumph. For them, as much as for a growing number of modern Iranians who themselves had swelled the street crowds shouting pro-Khomeini slogans, the revolution became "enigmatic," "bizarre," and "unthinkable."

In the words of one Western scholar, the revolution was "deviant" because it established an Islamic republic and also since "according to social-scientific explanations for revolution, it should not have happened at all, or when it did." That is why large numbers of disillusioned Iranians began to add their voice to the Shah and the small remnants of his regime in putting forward conspiracy theories — chiefly and plainly that America (and / or Britain) had been behind the revolution in order to stop the Shah pushing for higher oil prices. It was even said that the West had been afraid that economic development under the Shah would soon rob it of its markets.

Before the fall of the Shah's regime, this "puzzle" of the Iranian Revolution was somewhat closed to the eyes of Western observers. All the signs had been there, but they were largely eclipsed by the massive peaceful processions, the solidarity and virtual unanimity of the society to overthrow the state, and the blood sacrifice. They were eclipsed also by the phenomenon of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, every one of whose words was received as divine inspiration by the great majority of Iranians — modern as well as traditional.

It is certainly possible to make sense of Iranian revolutions by utilizing the tools and methods of the same social sciences that have been used in explaining Western revolutions. However, explanations of Iranian revolutions that are based on the application of such tools and methods to Western history inevitably result in confusion, contradiction, and bewilderment. As Karl Popper once noted, there is no such thing as History; there are histories. The most obvious point of contrast is that in Western revolutions, the societies in question were divided, and it was the underprivileged classes that revolted against the privileged classes, who were most represented by the state. In both the traditional and the modern Iranian revolutions, however, the whole society — rich and poor — revolted against the state.

From the Western perspective, it would certainly make no sense for some of the richest classes of the society to finance and organize the movement, while a few of the others either sit on the fence or believe that it was America's doing and could not be helped. Similarly, it would make no sense by Western criteria for the entire state apparatus (except the military, which quit in the end) to go on an indefinite general strike, providing the most potent weapon for the success of the revolution. Nor would it make sense for almost the entire intellectual community and modern educated groups to rally behind Khomeini and his call for Islamic government.

The 1979 revolution was a characteristically Iranian revolution — a revolution by the whole society against the state in which various ideologies were represented, the most dominant being those with Islamic tendencies (Islamist, Marxist-Islamic and democratic-Islamic) and Marxist-Leninist tendencies (Fada'i, Tudeh, Maoist, Trotskyist, and others). The conflict within the groups with Islamic and Marxist-Leninist tendencies was probably no less intense than that between the two tendencies taken together. Yet they were all united in the overriding objective of bringing down the Shah and overthrowing the state. More effectively, the mass of the population who were not strictly ideological according to any of these tendencies — and of whom the modern middle classes were qualitatively the most important — were solidly behind the single objective of removing the Shah. Any suggestion of a compromise was tantamount to treason. Moreover, if any settlement had been reached short of the overthrow of the monarchy, legends would have grown as to how the liberal bourgeoisie had stabbed the revolution in the back on the order of their "foreign [i.e. American and British] masters."

The most widespread and commonly held slogan that united the various revolutionary parties and their supporters regardless of party and program was “Let him [the Shah] go and let there be flood afterwards” (In beravad va har cheh mikhahad beshavad). Many changed their minds in the following years, but nothing was likely to make them see things differently at the time. Thirty years later, Ebrahim Yazdi, a leading assistant of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Paris and later Foreign Minister in the post-revolutionary provisional government, was reported in Washington as speaking “candidly of how his revolutionary generation had failed to see past the short-term goal of removing the Shah...”

Those who lost their lives in various towns and cities throughout the revolution certainly played a major part in the process. But the outcome would have been significantly different if the commercial and financial classes, which had reaped such great benefits from the oil bonanza, had not financed the revolution; or especially if the National Iranian Oil Company employees, high and low civil servants, judges, lawyers, university professors, intellectuals, journalists, school teachers, students, etc., had not joined in a general strike; or if the masses of young and old, modern and traditional, men and women, had not manned the huge street columns; or if the military had united and resolved to crush the movement.

The revolutions of 1906-1909 and 1977-1979 look poles apart in many respects. Yet they were quite similar with regard to some of their basic characteristics, which may also help explain many of the divergences between them. Both were revolts of the society against the state. Merchants, traders, intellectuals, and urban masses played a vital role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1909, but so did leading ‘ulama’ and powerful landlords, such that without their active support the triumph of 1909 would have been difficult to envisage — making it look as if “the church” and “the feudal-aristocratic class” were leading a “bourgeois democratic revolution”! In that revolution, too, various political movements and agendas were represented, but they were all united in the aim of overthrowing the arbitrary state (and ultimately Muhammad ‘Ali Shah), which stood for traditionalism, so that most of the religious forces also rallied behind the modernist cause, albeit haphazardly.

Many of the traditional forces backing the Constitutional Revolution regretted it after the event, as did many of the modernists who participated in the revolution of February 1979, when the outcome ran contrary to their own best hopes and wishes. But no argument would have made them withdraw their support before the collapse of the respective regimes. There were those in both revolutions who saw that total revolutionary triumph would make some, perhaps many, of the revolutionaries regret the results afterwards, but very few of them dared to step forward. Sheikh Fazlollah in the earlier case and Shahpur Bakhtiar in the later are noteworthy examples. But they were both doomed because they had no social base, or in other words, they were seen as having joined the side of the state, however hard they denied it. In a revolt against an arbitrary state, whoever wants anything short of its removal is branded a traitor. That is the logic of the slogan “Let him go and let there be flood afterwards!”