

The Iranian Revolution (1977-1979)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Dates: 1977-79

Nature of Struggle: Revolution against dictatorship

Target: Regime of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi

Movement: Urban poor, students, trade unions, intellectuals, leftists, Islamists, and others, led by Shi'a clerics

Conflict Summary:

The Iranian Revolution of 1977-79 was the first in a series of mass popular civil insurrections which would result in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in dozens of countries over the next three decades. Unlike most of the other uprisings that would topple dictators in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia and Africa, the result of the Iranian struggle was not the establishment of liberal democracy but of a new form of authoritarianism. However, except for a series of short battles using light weaponry in the final hours of the uprising, the revolutionary forces themselves were overwhelmingly nonviolent. The autocratic monarchy of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi faced a broad coalition of opposition forces, including Marxists and constitutional liberals, but the opposition ultimately became dominated by the mullahs of the country's Shia hierarchy. Despite severe repression against protestors, a series of demonstrations and strikes over the previous two years came to a peak in the fall of 1978, as millions of opponents of the Shah's regime clogged the streets of Iran's cities and work stoppages paralyzed the country. The Shah fled into exile in January 1979 and exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile to lead the new Islamic Republic.

Political History:

For much of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Iran's autonomy was challenged by Russia and, in particular, Great Britain. In 1890, an unpopular concession to British tobacco interests led leading Shia clerics to call for nationalist protests and a nationwide tobacco strike, which

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succeeded forcing the Shah (emperor) to cancel the concession in early 1892. In 1905, in opposition to widespread corruption by the Qajar dynasty and allied regional nobles and a series of other concessions to Russian and other foreign interests, an uprising – initially led by merchants and clergy – ensued which would continue for the next six years. What became known as the Constitutional Revolution, in which many thousands of Iranians engaged in such nonviolent actions as peaceful protests, boycotts and mass sit-ins, resulted in significant political and social reforms, including the establishment of an elected parliament to share power with the Shah and anti-corruption measures. A British-backed coup in 1925 led to the establishment of an authoritarian dynasty, initially under Reza Shah Pahlavi which turned the majlis (parliament) into a rubber stamp for his decrees.

In 1941, concerned with the Shah's pro-Axis sympathies, British and Soviet troops occupied the country forcing the Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. In the more liberal climate following the Allied victory in World War II, the democratically-elected majlis reasserted its power, electing the nationalist prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1950. Soon thereafter, the Mossadegh government nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British monopoly, which led to an international boycott of Iran's primary export. As the economic situation deteriorated and political unrest grew, a power struggle ensued between the young Shah and the elected prime minister, with the Shah fleeing into exile in 1953. A CIA-sponsored coup soon thereafter ousted Mossadegh and his nationalist supporters and returned the Shah to power as an absolute monarch. The oil companies were returned to their foreign owners, the majlis was largely stripped of its power, and leftists, nationalists, Islamists and all other opponents to the regime were ruthlessly suppressed.

Through mass arms transfers from the United States, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi built one of the most powerful armed forces ever seen in the Middle East. His American-trained secret police, the SAVAK, had been thought to have successfully terrorized the population into submission during the next two decades through widespread killings, torture and mass detentions. By the mid-1970s, most of the leftist, liberal, nationalist, and other secular opposition leadership had been successfully repressed through murder, imprisonment or

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exile, and most of their organizations banned. It was impossible to suppress the Islamist opposition as thoroughly, however, so it was out of mosques and among the mullahs that much of the organized leadership of the movement against the Shah's dictatorship emerged.

Open resistance began in 1977, when exiled opposition leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for strikes, boycotts, tax refusal and other forms of noncooperation with the Shah's regime. Such resistance was met with brutal repression by the government. The pace of the resistance accelerated as massacres of civilians were answered by larger demonstrations following the Islamic 40-day mourning period. In October and November of 1978, a series of strikes by civil servants and workers in government industries crippled the country. The crisis deepened when oil workers struck at the end of October and demanded the release of political prisoners, costing the government \$60 million a day. An ensuing general strike on November 6 paralyzed the country. Even as some workers returned to their jobs, disruption of fuel oil supplies and freight transit, combined with shortages of raw materials resulting from a customs strike, largely kept economic life in the country at a standstill.

Despite providing rhetorical support for an improvement in the human rights situation in Iran, the Carter administration continued military and economic support for the Shah's increasingly repressive regime, even providing fuel for the armed forces and other security services facing shortages due to the strikes.

Under enormous pressure, the oil workers returned to work but continued to stage slowdowns. Later in November, the Shah's nightly speeches were interrupted when workers cut off the electricity at precisely the time of his scheduled addresses. Massive protests filled the streets in major cities in December as oil workers walked out again and an ongoing general strike closed the refineries and the central bank. Despite thousands of unarmed protesters being killed by the Shah's forces, the protesters' numbers increased, with as many as nine million Iranians taking to the streets in cities across the country in largely nonviolent protests. The Shah fled on January 16, 1979, and Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile two weeks later. He appointed Mehdi Bazargan prime minister, thus establishing a parallel government to challenge

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the Shah's appointed prime minister Shapur Bahktiar. With the loyalty of the vast majority clearly with the new Islamic government, Bahktiar resigned February 11.

While the revolution had the support of a broad cross-section of society (including Islamists, secularists, nationalists, laborers, and ethnic minorities), Khomeini and other leading Shi'a clerics—strengthened by a pre-existing network of social service and other parallel institutions—consolidated their hold and established an Islamic theocracy. The regime shifted far to the right by the spring of 1981, purging moderate Islamists—including the elected president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr—and imposing a totalitarian system.

Strategic Actions:

The Iranian revolution relied on many methods of unarmed insurrection—such as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, contestation of public space, and the establishment of parallel institutions—that would be used in the Philippines, Latin America, Eastern Europe and elsewhere in subsequent years.

Despite the bloody image of the revolution and the authoritarianism and militarism of the Islamic Republic that followed, there was a clear commitment to keeping the actual insurrection unarmed. Protestors were told by the leadership of the resistance to try to win over the troops rather than attack them; indeed, thousands of troops deserted, some in the middle of confrontations with crowds. Clandestinely smuggled audio cassette tapes of Ayatollah Khomeini speaking about the revolution played a key role in the movement's mass mobilization, and led Abolhassan Sadegh, an official with the Ministry of National Guidance, to note that "tape cassettes are stronger than fighter planes." Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches, circulated through such covert methods, emphasized the power of unarmed resistance and non-cooperation. In one speech, he said, "The clenched fists of freedom fighters can crush the tanks and guns of the oppressors." There were few of the violent activities normally associated with armed revolutions such as shooting soldiers, setting fires to government buildings or looting. Such incidents that did occur were unorganized and spontaneous and did not

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appear to have the support of the leadership of the movement.

One element that contributed to people's willingness to mobilize under harsh repression was the value of martyrdom in Shia Islam. The movement's emphasis was to "save Islam by our blood." Indeed, there are interesting parallels between the legacy of martyrdom inspired by early Shia leader Imam Hossein and the Gandhian tradition of self-sacrifice. As demonstrated by their subsequent rule, the Iranian revolution's leadership clearly did not support nonviolence in principle, but recognized its utilitarian advantages against the well-armed security apparatus of the Shah's regime.

Ensuing Events:

The success of the U.S.-backed repressive apparatus of the Shah in suppressing liberal, secular, and leftist opposition, combined with the power of the Shia religious hierarchy, allowed for Islamist hardliners to consolidate their power by the spring of 1981. The war with Iraq, international isolation, a low-level urban guerrilla war, and a series of bloody purges created conditions where public nonviolent opposition to the regime during the subsequent decade became virtually impossible.

By the mid-1990s, enough political space had opened for the election of Mohammed Khatami, a moderate cleric, to the presidency, but hardliners blocked his efforts at reform, despite a series of large student-led demonstrations in support of Khatami's proposals. Ultra-conservative clerics and their supporters re-consolidated their hold on power by 2004, but popular demand for change continued to grow among significant segments of the Iranian population, which resulted in the popular uprising following apparently stolen presidential elections in June 2009. Many of the tactics of the Islamic Revolution re-emerged during these massive protests, such as chanting "Allahu Akbar!" ("God is Great") from rooftops at an appointed hour, the use of the color green (the color of Islam), and making handprints from the blood of killed and wounded demonstrators on city walls.

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For Further Reading:

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- Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*. Westview, 1988
- Saleh, M.M. *Insurgency through Culture and Religion: The Islamic Revolution of Iran*. Praeger, 1988
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