

THE
LAST GREAT
REVOLUTION

*Turmoil and
Transformation in Iran*

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But Iran is also home to mainstream Sunni Muslims as well as other smaller Muslim sects. And there are enough Iranian Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to have their own special seats in Parliament. Most big Iranian cities have at least one church, synagogue and fire temple. The one faith shunned politically and persecuted exclusively on religious grounds is that of the three million Baha'is, whose break from Shi'ite Islam in the nineteenth century is still viewed as heresy.

Iran is diverse politically too. Again despite stereotypes that haven't changed much since 1979, Iran has actually evolved a great deal since the shah departed. In some ways it is unrecognizable from the early days, and not only because the revolution's rigid rules relaxed enough to allow nail polish to be sold at every salon, perfumerie and department store, often in outrageous shades.

So much has changed that, as Iran celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1999, I decided another book was needed to put an extraordinary event into the broader perspective of modern history. But this book is quite different from my earlier book on the Iranian revolution's first decade. The first one was a chronological account of key events and major players. The voice and analysis in that volume were my own.

This book is a human journey inside twenty years of Iran's revolution. It's about the people and places that make up Iran and it unfolds through the pressing issues in Iranian life, from love and family to freedom of expression, from religious reform to women's rights, from culture to economics.

This time, Iranians speak for themselves about their ideas, experiences, dreams and frustrations. The issues and individual stories chronicle how the world's only modern theocracy gradually adapted—and how the revolutions within the revolution helped Iran become more modern and less theocratic. Together, they also offer a prognosis about the Islamic republic's future.

Needless to say, a lot still hasn't changed. Many of the unusual rules—unusual in Western eyes, anyway—still apply.

As the Lonely Planet guide advises a new generation of foreign tourists daring to visit Iran, "When making a personal compliment about someone—such as when telling a mother how handsome her child is—always say *mashallah*, or "God has willed it," for fear of invoking divine retribution. The idea is that all beauty and goodness are gifts of God—and can be taken away by Him at any time."⁴

Understanding Iran isn't as easy as it once was—or at least as out-

siders thought it was. But given Iran's history, resources and location, the country is no less important today than it was during the monarchy. The system has changed, but Iranians haven't. This book is written in the hope that sharing a personal odyssey through twenty years of Iran's historic revolution will help outsiders see what is there, not just what they want to see.

Chahsadi told me. "We use gas and electricity in our homes, so there's no reason we shouldn't use it in our temples too."

To understand what role Zoroastrians played in Iran's Islamic political culture, I went to see Parviz Ravani. In 1999, Ravani was serving his second—and he said final—term as the Zoroastrian member of Parliament. I called on him in an office starkly bare except for a desk and the omnipresent photographs of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei.

Ravani was surprisingly candid. "The minorities have only five parliamentary seats to the two hundred sixty-five the Muslims have, so we can't really do anything in terms of significant legislation. And believe me, there are things we'd like to change," he said.

At the top of the list were laws that discriminated against minorities by encouraging conversion to Islam.

"For example, if my child becomes a Muslim, then all my property will go to that child upon my death. None of my other children who didn't convert will stand to get anything. That extends even to my nephew. If he becomes a Muslim, then all my property would go to him, not my own children," Ravani added.

"That's a problem not just for Zoroastrians but also for Christians and Jews and any other religion too."

Like the female members of Parliament—who actually outnumbered them—the five minority politicians tended to sit together during legislative sessions, Ravani said. But they acted individually out of concern that Muslim politicians might suspect any joint strategy was a plot against them.

"We're free to say what we want in Parliament. No one says, 'What are you doing?' or 'You can't say that.' Most of the time we each talk about our people's problems. I talk six or seven times a year, which probably makes me the most active of the five minority members," he said.

Overall, he added, Zoroastrians and the other minorities could be worse off—even much worse off—considering the neighborhood.

"Minorities live better in Iran than in other countries in this region. We do our religious things freely," he added, noting that he made wine at home, as did many of his friends. "We're much more comfortable and much safer than Muslims in India or Christians in Saudi Arabia," he said.

Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrian Christians and Armenians (the only minority with two seats) are also more fortunate than other minorities in Iran, including Sikhs, Catholics and especially the Baha'is, who don't have

special political representation. Their electoral choices are limited to Muslim candidates.²²

Like members of the other recognized minorities, many Zoroastrians told me that they fared better after the election of President Khatami, who was born and brought up in Yazd. His father, a powerful cleric, had worked closely with the local Zoroastrians.

"Khatami has lived among us and knows us well," Ravani said. "He knows we want coexistence."

Yet after almost three thousand years, the Zoroastrians were also leaving Iran.

Ravani's wife and two children lived in Toronto, where she was studying pediatrics in a Canadian university. And the brother of Rostam Chahsadi, the Zoroastrian high priest in Iran and technically in the world, was also a prominent priest—in Los Angeles. Neither case was unusual. As the twentieth century ended, California could claim more Zoroastrians than Iran.

SHIRAZ

Its inhabitants are, amongst all Persians, the most subtle, the most ingenious, the most vivacious, even as their speech is to this day the purest and most melodious.

—EDWARD BROWNE,
A Year Amongst the Persians, 1893

Iran was born around Shiraz. More than 3,500 years ago waves of Aryans, a nomadic Indo-European people who much later would inspire the country's modern name, moved from chilly northern climes to the grand oasis near the Mountain of Mercy. Ever since then, the area around Shiraz has inspired the country's deepest passions—about the raptures of the soul and the mysteries of the spirit, about lyrical poetry and about the roses that abound almost year-round in its vast gardens and along its boulevards.

In the medieval world, Shiraz was one of Asia's most important and innovative cities. It was known for learning and art, painting and literature. Inspired by his hometown, an architect from Shiraz later provided the design for the Taj Mahal in India. By the eighteenth century, Shiraz was Iran's national capital.

By the revolution's twentieth anniversary, however, Shiraz was, alas,

CHAPTER 6

1. St. Vincent, *Iran: A Travel Survival Kit*, p. 110.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
 3. Robin Wright, "Forget Politics—Tehran's Traffic Can Drive You Mad," *Los Angeles Times World Report*, June 20, 1995, p. 6.
 4. Sharon L. Camp, ed., *Population Action International, Cities: Life in the World's 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas* (Washington: Population Action International, 1990), wall chart.
 5. "Iran Widens Tehran School Closures Due to Smog," Reuters, Dec. 15, 1998.
 6. St. Vincent, *Iran: A Travel Survival Kit*, p. 138.
 7. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*.
 8. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, pp. 195–96; Keddie, *Roots of the Revolution*.
 9. Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, pp. 264–66.
 10. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. 252–53.
 11. M. T. Faramarzi, *A Travel Guide to Iran* (Tehran: Yassaman Publications, 1997), p. 273.
 12. It was not the last time the Persians and Jews would ally to balance the numerical or geographic dominance of the Arabs. Iran's last shah also had strong diplomatic and commercial relations with the modern state of Israel.
 13. Among Arab states, the Jewish community in Iraq dropped from some 150,000 in 1951 to less than 100 by 1998 and in Morocco from 250,000 in the 1940s to some 8,000 in 1998. By the century's end, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya had anywhere from a dozen to a few hundred.
 14. Armenian Christians, for example, have two members of Parliament. But the religious minorities don't have to vote for one of their own; they have the option of voting with the general population for a Muslim representative.
 15. Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Although Regime Anti-Israel, Thousands of Jews Stay on in Iran," *Associated Press*, Jan. 19, 1998.
 16. "Iran Report on Human Rights Practices," in *U.S. Department of State Annual Human Rights Report 1996*, Washington: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.
 17. Ann Lolordo, "Being Jewish in a Muslim Theocracy," *Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 12, 1997.
 18. Kianouche Dorranie, "Arrest of Jewish 'Spies' Triggers New Round of Factional Fighting in Iran," *Agence France-Presse*, June 12, 1999.
 19. The name Zoroaster is the Greek version of the original Zarathustra. He was born in Mazar-e Sharif in what was then Persia but is today Afghanistan.
 20. Severy, ed., *Great Religions of the World*, p. 18.
 21. Geoffrey Parrinder, ed., *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 1983), pp. 177–91.
 22. The Baha'is are the largest non-Muslim sect in Iran—and the most persecuted. The Islamic republic views the Baha'is, who number between 300,000 and 350,000, as a "misguided sect" because they rejected the Shi'ite brand of Islam. They have also been suspect politically because the shah employed a few Baha'is in senior positions.
- After the revolution, the government banned Baha'is from teaching, practicing their faith or maintaining links with brethren abroad, according to several U.S. State Department Human Rights Reports. Universities denied admittance to Baha'i students. Baha'is have also been regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization. More

- than two hundred Baha'is have been executed since the revolution, according to human rights groups.
23. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 183–85.
 24. Algar, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 200–208.
 25. Munson, *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East*, p. 20.
 26. Ghani, *The Memoirs of Dr. Ghassem Ghani*, p. 18, translation by Gertrude Bell.
 27. Translated by John Charles Edward Bowen, in *Iran Today*, by Jean Hureau (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1972), p. 165.
 28. Parrinder, *World Religions*, pp. 493–96.
 29. Arberry, *Hafez: Fifty Poems*, p. 118.
 30. Ghani, *The Memoirs of Dr. Ghassem Ghani*, p. 16, translation by Gertrude Bell.
 31. Arberry, *Hafez: Fifty Poems*, p. 110, translated by R. Le Gallienne.
 32. St. Vincent, *Iran: A Travel Survival Kit*, p. 238.
 33. M. T. Faramarzi, *A Travel Guide to Iran*, p. 91.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
 36. St. Vincent, *Iran: A Travel Survival Kit*, p. 143.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
 38. Wright, *In the Name of God*, p. 50.
 39. Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 19.
 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–46.
 41. Algar, *Islam and Revolution*.
 42. *Ibid.*, pp. 181–88.
 43. Jean Hureau, *Iran Today* (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1972), p. 25.
 44. Massoumeh Ebtekar, Iran's vice president for the environment, in a speech on Caspian oil sponsored by the Iranian Institute for Energy Studies in Tehran, Nov. 9, 1998.
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy, graphic reproduced, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 10, 1998.
 47. Speech by Franz B. Ehrhardt, President and Managing Director of Conoco EurAsia at the Caspian Oil and Gas Resources conference in Tehran, Nov. 7, 1998.

CHAPTER 7

1. Sign painted on the exterior wall at Niavaran Palace, one of the shah's former residences.
2. "Khatami Urges Clergy to Take 'Present-Day Realities' into Account," *Agence France-Presse*, May 26, 1999.
3. Wright, *In the Name of God*, pp. 48–51; Peter Jennings, "The Century: The Evolution of Revolution," *ABC News special*, Apr. 10, 1999.
4. Jennings, "The Century."
5. Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Mellowed Captors Invite Former U.S. Hostages Back to Iran," *Associated Press*, Nov. 2, 1998.
6. Bakhshash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, p. 75.
7. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution*, p. 266.
8. Kifner, "How a Sit-in Turned into a Siege"; Robert D. McFadden, Joseph B.