

Iran

a country study

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On the cover: A bas-relief of a bearded sphinx, ca. 500 B.C., from Persepolis

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the article. Seminary students took to the streets in Qom and clashed with police, and a number of demonstrators were killed. On February 18, mosque services and demonstrations were held in several cities to honor those killed in the Qom demonstrations. In Tabriz these demonstrations turned violent, and it was two days before order could be restored. By the summer, riots and antigovernment demonstrations had swept dozens of towns and cities.

The cycle of protests that began in Qom and Tabriz in 1978 differed in nature, composition, and intent from the protests of the preceding year. The 1977 protests were primarily the work of middle-class intellectuals, lawyers, and secular politicians. They took the form of letters, resolutions, and declarations and were aimed at the restoration of constitutional rule. The protests that rocked Iranian cities in the first half of 1978, by contrast, were led by religious elements and were centered on mosques and religious events. They drew on traditional groups in the bazaar and the urban working class for support. The protesters used a form of calculated violence to achieve their ends, attacking and destroying carefully selected targets that represented objectionable features of the regime: nightclubs and cinemas, as symbols of moral corruption and the influence of Western culture; banks, as symbols of economic exploitation; offices of Rastakhiz (the party created by the shah in 1975 to run the one-party state) and police stations, as symbols of political repression. The protests, moreover, aimed at fundamental change: In slogans and leaflets, the protesters demanded the shah's removal, depicting Khomeini as their leader and an Islamic state as their ideal. From his exile in Iraq, Khomeini continued to urge further demonstrations, rejected compromise with the regime, and demanded the overthrow of the shah.

The government's position deteriorated further in August 1978, when more than 400 people died in a fire at the Rex Cinema in Abadan. The fire was started by religiously inclined students, but the opposition carefully cultivated a widespread conviction that it was the work of SAVAK agents. Following the Rex Cinema fire, the shah removed Amuzegar and named Jafar Sharif Emami prime minister. Sharif Emami, a former prime minister and a trusted royalist, had for many years served as president of the Senate. He eased press controls and permitted more open debate in the Majlis. He released a number of imprisoned clerics, revoked the imperial calendar, closed gam-

bling casinos, and obtained from the shah the dismissal from court and public office of members of the Baha'i faith, a religion to which the clerics strongly objected (see *Non-Muslim Minorities*, ch. 2). These measures, however, did not quell public protests. On September 4, more than 100,000 took part in the public prayers to mark the end of Ramazan (Ramadan), the Muslim fasting month. Growing antigovernment demonstrations continued for the next two days, taking on an increasingly radical tone. After the government declared martial law in Tehran and 11 other cities, troops fired into a crowd of demonstrators in Tehran's Jaleh Square. A large number of protesters, certainly many more than the official figure of 87, were killed. The day of the Jaleh Square shooting came to be known as "Black Friday." The shootings further radicalized the opposition movement and made compromise with the regime, even by the moderates, less likely.

Khomeini, expelled from Iraq, went to France in October and established his headquarters at Neauphle-le-Château, outside Paris. His arrival in France gave Khomeini and his movement exposure in the world press and media. It made possible easy telephone communication with lieutenants in Iran, thus permitting better coordination of the opposition movement. It also allowed Iranian political and religious leaders to visit him for direct consultations. One such visitor, National Front leader Karim Sanjabi, met with Khomeini in early November 1978 and issued a three-point statement that for the first time committed the National Front to the Khomeini demand for the deposition of the shah and the establishment of a "democratic and Islamic" government.

In September, workers in the public sector, including the oil industry, had begun striking on a large scale. Their demands for improved salaries and benefits quickly escalated into demands for changes in the political system. The unavailability of fuel oil and freight transport and shortages of raw materials resulting from a customs strike, meanwhile, led to a shutdown of most private-sector industries in November.

On November 5, after violent demonstrations in Tehran, the shah replaced Prime Minister Sharif Emami with General Gholam Reza Azhari, commander of the Imperial Guard. Addressing the nation for the first time in many months, the shah declared that he had heard the people's "revolutionary message," promised to correct past mistakes, and urged a period of quiet to permit promised reforms. Presumably to pla-

cate public opinion, the shah allowed the arrest of 132 former leaders and government officials, including former Prime Minister Hoveyda, an ex-chief of SAVAK, and several former cabinet ministers. He also ordered the release of more than 1,000 political prisoners, including a Khomeini associate, Ayatollah Hosain Ali Montazeri.

The appointment of Azhari as prime minister brought about a short-lived abatement of the strike fever, and oil production improved. Khomeini dismissed the shah's promises as worthless, however, and called for continued protests. The strikes resumed, virtually shutting down the government, and clashes between demonstrators and troops became a daily occurrence. On December 9 and 10, 1978, several hundred thousand persons participated in antiregime marches in Tehran and the provinces.

During December the shah finally began exploratory talks with members of the moderate opposition. Discussions with the National Front's Karim Sanjabi proved unfruitful; Sanjabi was bound by his agreement with Khomeini. At the end of December, another National Front leader, Shapour Bakhtiar, agreed to form a government on condition that the shah leave the country. Bakhtiar secured a vote of confidence from the two houses of the Majlis on January 3, 1979, and presented his cabinet to the shah three days later. The shah left the country on January 16. As his aircraft took off, celebrations broke out across the country.

The Bakhtiar Government

Once installed as prime minister, Bakhtiar took several measures designed to appeal to elements in the opposition movement. He lifted restrictions on the press; the newspapers, on strike since November, resumed publication. He freed all remaining political prisoners and promised the dissolution of SAVAK, the lifting of martial law, and free elections. He announced Iran's withdrawal from CENTO, canceled arms orders worth US\$7 billion from the United States, and announced that Iran would no longer sell oil to South Africa or Israel. Although Bakhtiar won the qualified support of leading moderate clerics such as Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, he did not win the support of Khomeini and the main opposition elements, who were now committed to ending the monarchy and establishing a new political order. The National Front expelled Bakhtiar, and Khomeini declared his government ille-

cant minority in the provinces of Fars, Gilan, Hamadan, Mazandaran, North Khorasan, Qazvin, Razavi Khorasan, South Korasan, and Tehran. Except for the Azerbaijanis, most Turkic-speaking groups are tribally organized. Some Turkic-speaking tribes continue to lead a nomadic or seminomadic life. Educated Turkic speakers in the large cities also speak Persian.

The Turkic languages belong to the Ural-Altai family, which includes many languages of Central Asia and western China, as well as Turkish, Hungarian, and Finnish. The various Turkic languages spoken in Iran tend to be mutually intelligible. Of these, only Azerbaijani is written to any extent. In Iran it is written in the Arabic script, in contrast to the practice in the Republic of Azerbaijan, where a modified Latin alphabet is used.

Azerbaijanis

The Azerbaijanis account for 90 percent of all Turkic speakers in Iran. Most Azerbaijanis are concentrated in the northwestern corner of the country, where they form the majority population in an area between the Caspian Sea and Lake Urmia and the segment of the northern border formed by the Aras River south to the latitude of Tehran. Their language, Azerbaijani (also called Azeri or Turkish), is structurally similar to the Turkish spoken in Turkey. More than 65 percent of all Azerbaijanis live in urban areas. Major Azerbaijani cities include Tabriz, Ardabil, Khoi, Maragheh, and Zanjan. In addition, about 40 percent of the population of the region of Urmia in West Azarbaijan Province is Azerbaijani, as is one-third of Tehran's population. There are sizable Azerbaijani minorities in the major cities of northwestern Iran. The lifestyles of urban Azerbaijanis do not differ from those of Persians, and there is considerable intermarriage within the upper and middle classes in cities with mixed populations. Similarly, customs among Azerbaijani villagers do not appear to differ markedly from those of Persian villagers. The majority of Azerbaijanis, like the majority of Persians, are Shia Muslims, although some Azerbaijanis are Ahl-e Haqq Muslims or non-Muslim Baha'is.

Qashqais

The Qashqais are the second-largest Turkic-speaking group in Iran. Numbering about 600,000, they are a confederation of several Turkic-speaking tribes in Fars Province in south-central

fellow Muslims whose religion is incomplete because they do not accept the doctrine of the Imamate. Shia clergy tend to ascribe value to missionary work to convert Sunnis to what Shias regard as true Islam. Because the Sunnis generally live in the border regions of the country, there has been limited Shia-Sunni tension or conflict in most of Iran. In towns with mixed populations in West Azerbaijan, the Persian Gulf region, and Sistan va Baluchistan, however, tensions between Shias and Sunnis have existed both before and after the Revolution. Religious tensions tend to be highest during major Shia observances, especially Moharram. Because most Sunnis are members of ethnic minorities, religious and ethnic identities sometimes become fused. This combination has fueled complaints of discrimination, especially among some Sunni Kurds and Sunni Baluchis.

Non-Muslim Minorities

Christians

Beginning in the twentieth century, Christians generally have been permitted to participate in the economic and social life of the country. Iran's indigenous Christians include an estimated 300,000 Armenians, some 32,000 Assyrians, and a small number of Iranians who have converted to Roman Catholicism and Protestant sects or who are the descendants of Iranians who converted to those religions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see table 5, Appendix). The Armenians are predominantly urban and are concentrated in Tehran and Esfahan; smaller communities reside in Tabriz, Arak, and other cities. A majority of the Assyrians are also urban, although there are still several Assyrian villages in the Lake Urmia region. Although the Armenians and the Assyrians have encountered individual prejudice, they have not been subjected to persecution. The Armenians, especially, have achieved a relatively high standard of living and maintain several parochial primary and secondary schools.

The constitution of 1979 recognized the Armenians and Assyrians as official religious minorities. Armenians are entitled to elect two representatives to the Majlis and Assyrians, one. Both groups are permitted to follow their own religious laws in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Other Christians have not received any special recognition, and some Iranian Anglicans and Evangelicals have been persecuted. All Chris-

tians are required to observe the laws relating to attire and gender segregation in public gatherings. However, Christians are permitted to make wine for use in religious services. Tensions have existed between the government and Armenians over the administration of the Armenian schools. The Ministry of Education insisted for a decade after the Revolution that the principals of these schools be Muslims, that courses on Islam be required in the curricula, that other religion courses be taught in Persian, and that all female students observe *hejab* inside the schools. Government supervision gradually lessened during the 1990s, although in the early 2000s Armenian schools still taught an approved course on Islam.

Baha'is

Although the Baha'is are Iran's second-largest non-Muslim minority, they do not enjoy constitutional protection as an official religious minority. There were an estimated 250,000 Baha'is in Iran in 2005 according to Iranian figures, but other estimates are as high as 350,000. The Baha'is are scattered in small communities throughout Iran, with heavy concentrations in larger cities. Most Baha'is are urban, but there are some

Baha'i villages. The majority of Baha'is are Persians, but there is a significant minority of Azerbaijani Baha'is, and Baha'is also are represented in other ethnic groups in Iran.

The Baha'i faith originated in Iran in the mid-1800s, based on the teachings of Mirza Ali Muhammad and his disciple, Mirza Hussein Ali Nur, or Baha'u'llah, the faith's prophet-founder. It initially attracted a wide following among dissident Shia clergy and others dissatisfied with society, but since its inception it has met with intense hostility from mainstream Shia clergy. Upholding many teachings of Islam and other world religions, the faith stresses the brotherhood of all peoples, the eradication of all forms of prejudice, and the establishment of world peace. By the early twentieth century, the faith had spread to North America, Europe, and Africa.

Because the Shia clergy, like many other Iranians, continued to regard their faith as heretical, Baha'is in Iran have encountered much prejudice and sometimes even persecution. Their situation generally improved under the Pahlavi shahs, as the government sought to secularize public life. Baha'is were permitted to hold government posts and allowed to open their own schools, and many were successful in business and the professions. The faith expanded significantly in the 1960s. However, major instances of discrimination occurred in 1955 and 1978, and the faith's status changed drastically in 1979. The Islamic Republic did not recognize the Baha'is as a religious minority, and adherents to the faith were officially persecuted. More than 1,000 Baha'is were imprisoned and several hundred killed. Most privileges of citizenship were revoked. Several thousand Baha'is fled the country during the 1980s. Their situation improved marginally during the 1990s. However, in the early 2000s the United Nations Commission on Human Rights reported that Baha'is faced restrictions in employment, education, and the practice of their religion. Media condemnation of the faith became more frequent in 2005, and Baha'is continue to be subject to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment.

Zoroastrians

In the early 2000s, there were an estimated 32,000 Zoroastrians in Iran. The Zoroastrians speak Persian and are concentrated in Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd provinces. Zoroastrianism initially developed in Iran during the seventh century B.C. Later, it became the official religion of the Sassanian dynasty, which ruled Iran for approximately four centuries before being