

Second Edition

# THE MAKING OF IRAN'S ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

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From Monarchy  
to Islamic Republic

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quested the dissolution of SAVAK, a demand that the Shah and Amini would never have accepted. There were good reasons to mistrust Amini: He had quit Mossadeq's cabinet, he had negotiated the notorious 1954 oil treaty with the Western oil companies, and he was a potential rival to the National Front's leadership. But the new conditions demanded much cerebration. Amini's government represented a progressive faction of the ruling class and advocated a comprehensive reform program. The issue was not whether Amini's government was the best alternative but what could have replaced it. The leadership of the Second National Front, living vicariously through Mossadeq's image, followed the suicidal line of undermining Amini's government by asking for his resignation and calling for free elections. Nothing could have been more pleasing to the Shah, for what he feared most was the formation of any kind of alliance between Amini and the Second National Front. The Second National Front's hostility toward Amini was based on the tenuous theory that should Amini collapse, the Shah and the United States would definitely turn to them to form a new government. Amini did fall, but it marked the beginning of an era of imperial despotism, one in which the forces of the Second National Front came to play the role of frustrated bystanders.<sup>25</sup>

Fearful that Amini could challenge him, the Shah replaced Amini with Alam. Arsanjani, however, remained in the new cabinet, symbolizing the Shah's commitment to land reform. In late 1962, when Arsanjani organized the Congress of Rural and Cooperative Societies in Teheran, in which thousands of peasants and agricultural workers gathered to express their support for him, the Shah reacted in alarm. He wasted no time asking for Arsanjani's resignation. If Amini had spoken of reform, the Shah was now talking of revolution—the "White Revolution." By championing the land reform program, he was hoping to win the hearts and minds of the lower classes and thereby achieve the dual objectives of enlarging his popular base of support and preventing the opposition from mobilizing them against his regime.

The White Revolution originally included six provisions: land reform, nationalization of forests, sale of state-owned enterprises to the public, a workers' profit-sharing plan, women's suffrage, and creation of the Literacy Corps. To legitimize the White Revolution, the Shah called for a national referendum in early 1963 in which 5,598,711 voted for the reforms and 4,115 voted against. The fraudulent referendum was boycotted by the opposition to the Shah. However, President Kennedy immediately sent a telegram congratulating the Shah on his "victory in the historic referendum."<sup>26</sup>

With Arsanjani out of the picture, land reform took a more conservative turn in its second and third stages. In the second stage landowners were allowed to keep as much as 150 hectares of their land and were offered a variety of options for the excess land, ranging from renting or selling it to the farmers to buying the peasant's right of cultivation. In the third phase, started in 1969, the goal was to increase productivity through mechanization and to terminate tenancies by pro-

viding for the sale of all lands leased by the landowners on a thirty-year basis. This was to be accomplished by creating farm cooperatives.

The land reform program had far-reaching consequences. First, it drastically curtailed the political power of the landed upper class and for all practical purposes eradicated absentee ownership. Second, it created a large petty-landowning stratum from the ranks of the *nassaaq* sharecroppers. In 1961, there were more than 2.1 million *nassaaq* sharecroppers. By 1971, 1,766,625, or 92 percent of them, had received legal title to the land they worked.<sup>27</sup> If the average household consisted of five members, more than 9.6 million people benefited from the reform. Third, the absolute authority of the landlords was replaced with that of the state as manifested in the creation of dozens of new institutions in the rural areas such as Anjoman-e Deh (Village Organization), Khane-ye Ensaf (House of Justice), the Literacy Corps, the Health Corps, and the Religious Corps. Most important, state-controlled banks penetrated the rural areas and made new landowners and the entire rural community dependent upon the state.

Fourth, because land reform did not provide necessary capital for the peasants who had acquired lands and did not create a sufficient infrastructure in the rural regions to assist the new landowners in managing their lands, agricultural output drastically declined during the 1960s and 1970s. This increased the need for exports and Iran's dependence on Western nations. Fifth, even though land reform contributed to the political stability of rural communities, it indirectly caused tension in urban areas as millions of landless peasants migrated to the major cities to become the foot soldiers of the Islamic Revolution. Sixth, the land reform generated acrimony between the ulama and the Shah's regime. There were more than 40,000 *vaqf* holdings (lands endowed for charitable purposes) in 1960. Under the provisions of the second phase of land reform, *vaqf* holders were required to negotiate a ninety-nine-year tenancy agreement with the *nassaaq* sharecroppers. In most cases, the annual rents paid by the *nassaaq* sharecroppers came to less than they had paid under the old system. This curtailed the ulama's revenues from the *vaqf* holdings.<sup>28</sup> It was not surprising that the ulama posed the greatest threat to the Shah's rule in 1963.

### Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shah's Reforms

From 1953 to early 1960, the relationship between the Shah and the ulama was peaceful if not amicable. After all, the leading ulama, including Ayatollahs Borujerdi, Behbahani, and Kashani, had tacitly supported the military coup of 1953. In fact, Ayatollah Borujerdi was one of the first to send a welcome telegram to the Shah after his return to Iran from Rome in the aftermath of that coup. His reward was easy access to the throne.

The Shah saw in the ulama a powerful force against the radicalism of the left and the liberalism of the middle class. Anxious to demonstrate his commitment

to Shi'ism, he made frequent trips to the sacrosanct shrines in Mashhad and Qom and contributed handsomely to their refurbishment as well as to major Shi'i theological centers. As a gesture of goodwill toward the ulama, in 1955 his government did not stop an angry mob from attacking the Baha'is' main temple in Teheran. This action met with the ulama's approbation. Both Ayatollahs Borujerdi and Behbahani sent a widely publicized telegram congratulating the Shah and assuring him of the vigorous support of the faithful.<sup>29</sup>

The introduction of a land reform bill in 1959, however, put an end to this brief honeymoon. On February 23, 1960, Ayatollah Borujerdi wrote a letter to Seyyed Ja'far Behbahani, one of the Majles deputies, stating explicitly that the imposition of any limitation on landownership was ignominious to the Islamic laws and that the two houses of Parliament should "refrain from approving the bill."<sup>30</sup> In no position to antagonize the popular ayatollah, the government reached a rapprochement with Borujerdi and withdrew the bill. But with Borujerdi's death in March 1961, the Shah implemented the land reform.

Borujerdi's death created a leadership vacuum within the Shi'i hierarchy. A number of prominent ayatollahs, all with impressive credentials, were in competition to replace Borujerdi: Mohammad Hadi Milani in Mashhad, Kazem Shariatmadari in Tabriz, Mohsen Hakim in Najaf, Iraq, and Mohammad Reza Golpayegani and Ruhollah Khomeini in Qom. The Shah attempted in vain to influence the selection process. On the occasion of Borujerdi's death he sent a telegram of commiseration to Ayatollah Mohsen Hakim, recognizing him as the leading *marja'-e taqlid*. The monarch was thus hoping to move the center of Shi'ism from Qom to Najaf and to elevate a non-Iranian ayatollah unfamiliar with and perhaps unconcerned about Iranian politics to the highest position of Shi'i leadership. But none of the candidates ascended to the position of the sole *marja'-e taqlid* and Shi'ism once again became polycephalic.

The period immediately following Borujerdi's death also coincided with the revival of the ulama's fervent opposition to the government. Several factors contributed to this activism. First, those ulama who had not approved of Borujerdi's conciliatory and cooperative policy with the Shah were now in a position to publicly express their grievances against the government. Second, Iran, having experienced a sustained rate of expansion from the coup of 1953 through the late 1950s, was now plunged into a depression.

By the early 1960s, the government deficit grew to immense proportions, the balance-of-payments situation deteriorated, and inflation became rampant. Because of pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iran was forced to implement its Economic Stabilization Program in the late 1960s.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the imposition of this program, the government lowered its budget and its investments, froze hiring, cut employee salaries by about 3 percent, lowered drastically the amount of loans and credit to the private sector, and reduced imports. These policies increased bankruptcy among merchants and created much discontent among the bazaariis who sought and received support from their historic

allies, the ulama. Third, issues such as land reform, women's suffrage, and the de facto recognition of the state of Israel united the ulama against the state. In July 1962, 150 religious figures meeting at Al-Azhar in Cairo issued a *fatva* calling on Moslems of the world to begin their *jihad* (holy war) against the Shah for his pro-Israeli policies.<sup>32</sup>

The ulama's opposition to the government intensified when Amini announced his land reform program in 1961. To appease the clergy, Amini made some cosmetic public relations moves, such as appointing a deputy minister for religious affairs and making frequent visits to the residence of the leading ulama, including the ailing Ayatollah Kashani. But the ulama's opposition was more deep-rooted than Amini had imagined.

It was during the tenure of Asadollah Alam as prime minister that the ulama's opposition against the Shah's policies reached its zenith. They vehemently opposed the proposed Local Council Elections Bill of November 1962. And it was in connection with this bill that Ayatollah Khomeini first came to national attention as a political figure.

Khomeini's opposition to the Shah revolved around three issues: the Local Council Elections Bill, the National Referendum of 1963, and the granting of capitulatory rights to U.S. advisers and military personnel and their dependents in Iran in 1964.

The Local Council Elections decree that was approved by Alam's cabinet (in the absence of the Majles that had been dissolved by the Shah) granted suffrage to women and replaced the term "holy Quran" in the mandatory oath of office with "holy book." The ulama argued that the substitution of "holy book" for "holy Quran" would increase the infiltration of religious minorities, especially the heretical Baha'is, in the government and the armed forces. In a country where men do not enjoy the freedom to elect their representatives, they insisted, the granting of suffrage to women was no more than a recipe for increasing corruption and decadence. The three grand ayatollahs of Qom—Golpayegani, Shariatmadari, and Khomeini—sent telegrams to the Shah, declaring the decree unconstitutional and inimical to Islam. After a week, the Shah responded to the telegram, derogatorily referring to the signatories as *hojatolislams*, a rank below that of ayatollah.<sup>33</sup> In a separate telegram to the Shah, Khomeini sounded the tocsin: "You are surrounded by the sycophants and slaves who would attribute all anti-religion and unlawful acts to the person of His Majesty; and the approval of their treasonous and mistaken bill [decree] would undermine the Constitution which is the protector of sovereignty and kingship."<sup>34</sup> At this stage, Khomeini was cautious not to antagonize the Shah by dissociating him from the policies of Alam. The Shah did not even bother to respond to the telegram.

Throughout the country, the ulama used the pulpits in the mosques to incite the population against the government. Under pressure, Alam withdrew only the provision of the decree dealing with the oath of office. This concession did not appease the ulama. On the night when the ulama had planned a gathering at a Te-

heran mosque, Alam withdrew the entire bill. The ulama had scored a temporary victory, leading to a lull in their activism.

Khomeini's opposition to the government intensified in January 1963 when the Shah, hoping to legitimize his White Revolution, called for a national referendum. Included in the White Revolution was a provision granting suffrage to women. Khomeini argued that the constitution was ambiguous about which authority may call for a national referendum, implying that the Shah enjoyed no such privilege. Moreover, he maintained, "essentially referendum or national approval has no validity in Islam ... and the voters should have sufficient knowledge to understand what they are voting for. Consequently, a large majority [of Iranians] do not have the right to vote [for the referendum]."<sup>35</sup> (Ironically, sixteen years later, he relied on a national referendum to legitimize the creation of the Islamic Republic.) He asked the people to boycott the referendum and suggested the innovative idea that the ulama stage a strike during the holy month of Ramadan, the month of fasting, by not attending the mosques. Although Golpayegani and Shariatmadari issued a joint declaration with Khomeini condemning the referendum, they were unprepared to support Khomeini's call for a strike by the ulama.

The regime reacted violently against the ulama who opposed the referendum. The Shah's paratroopers attacked the theological Feyziyeh school in Qom, the stronghold of Khomeini. Young *tollab* (theology students) were beaten and several were killed. The government began drafting theology students for mandatory military service. The mass media portrayed the opponents of the referendum as "black reactionaries" supported by feudal lords who wished to return Iran to the dark ages. The attacks only intensified the spirit of contumacy in Khomeini. On June 3, 1963, Khomeini declared war on the Shah but not on the institution of monarchy: "Let me give you some advice, Mr. Shah! Dear Mr. Shah. ... Maybe those people [advisers and the government in power] want to present you as a Jew so that I will denounce you as an unbeliever and they can expel you from Iran and put an end to you! Don't you know that if one day some uproar occurs and that tables are turned, none of these people around you will be your friends. They are friends of the dollars; they have no religion, no loyalty."<sup>36</sup> So open an attack on the person of the Shah, combined with Khomeini's call to the Iranian army to join him for the "salvation of Islam and Iran," was intolerable. It was the first time since 1953 that an opposition leader had the courage to openly attack the person of the Shah. This is why on June 4, 1963, Khomeini was arrested by the government.

The arrest precipitated boisterous antigovernment disturbances in some major cities for a week. The climax of these activities was the June Uprising in Teheran. Khomeini's supporters made an aborted attempt to take over Teheran's main radio station but succeeded only in inflicting heavy damage on some government buildings, some liquor stores, and a Pepsi Cola bottling facility reportedly owned by a Baha'i. The rioters were small in number but strong and devoted in their commitment to Khomeini.

The government acted decisively. General Ne'mattollah Nassiri was appointed the military governor of Teheran as martial law was imposed in Teheran and some other cities. The government ordered the police to kill, and kill they did. One reporter observed that on June 5, "machine-gun fire still echoed through the rubble-strewn streets of the bazaar area. ... The bazaar area looked as if a tornado had hit it."<sup>37</sup> The official government estimate was that 20 were killed and 1,000 injured. The opposition claimed that thousands were massacred.

Not all the data about those who were arrested, injured, or killed are available. What is accessible is the information about 580 individuals who were injured or arrested by the government. Of those arrested and injured in the June Uprising, 27.6 percent were the skilled workers, followed by the ulama (15 percent), retailers and shopkeepers (13.4 percent), and the students (11.9 percent) (Table 3.1). The average age was about twenty-three years (Table 3.2).

The official explanation for this rebellion was that Khomeini and his supporters were against land reform and the progressive ideals of the White Revolution. To exculpate itself from any wrongdoing, the regime declared, without evidence, that Khomeini had a direct connection with President Abdul Naser of Egypt, one of the Shah's enemies, and that Egypt had financed the rebellion.<sup>38</sup> Unable to back up its claim, the government's accusation against Khomeini served only to make him more popular.

As calm was restored, Ayatollahs Shariatmadari, Najafi Mar'ashi, Hojatolislam Hossein Ali Montazeri, and others orchestrated a campaign for the immediate and unconditional release of Khomeini. They demanded television and radio time to clarify their views about government reforms. Moreover, Shariatmadari warned the authorities that according to Article 2 of the Supplementary Laws, high-ranking Shi'i ulama enjoy immunity and may not be jailed, tortured, or exiled—a reference to Khomeini's arrest.<sup>39</sup> After spending six weeks in jail, Khomeini was released but was denied permission to return to Qom and was kept under house arrest in Teheran. In a communiqué, the government announced that Khomeini had promised not to intervene in the affairs of the state, a claim that he subsequently denied having made.<sup>40</sup>

Khomeini was in no mood to compromise with the Pahlavi regime. As the Majles election approached, Khomeini's supporters asked the people to boycott the elections. The elections, open only to the Shah's loyalists, resulted in the victory of the Progressive Center group, led by Hassan Ali Mansur, who was named prime minister by the Shah. To improve relations with the ulama, Mansur allowed Khomeini to return to Qom.

By the time he returned to Qom in January 1964, Khomeini had emerged as a popular religious leader. He was given a hero's welcome. Immediately, his students at the Feyziyeh school submitted a ten-point proposal to the government. Among other things, it included a demand for the implementation of the 1906 Constitution, especially Article 2 of the Supplementary Laws, which gave the ulama veto power over Majles legislation. It called for annulling all un-Islamic de-

Alhayar Saleh, one of the leaders of the Second National Front, as saying that “since the ultimate aims of the Front were diametrically opposed to those of the *mullas*, the Front would never combine their forces with them against the government.”<sup>43</sup>

But if the Second National Front separated its destiny from the religious forces, Bazargan’s Liberation Movement, a small group of Islamic intellectuals, chose a different path and collaborated with the clergy. Nadar Saleh seemed to have offered an accurate analysis of the Liberation Movement as “the only people ... who could and did work actively with the *mullahs*, and if it came to a test, the Liberation Movement would at present undoubtedly have greater support among the common people than the National Front.”<sup>44</sup>

With alacrity, some of the ulama stood firm against the Shah. With the collaboration of some shopkeepers, merchants, and intellectuals, they challenged the Shah and lost. The defeat made it abundantly clear that more than a faction of this and a faction of that class was needed to seriously challenge the Shah. This is perhaps why, in 1978, Khomeini formed the broadest possible anti-Shah coalition, one that cut across class distinctions.

If a major segment of the opposition was confused, the Shah’s regime appeared confident and decisive. It had a stratagem of dealing with the opposition that worked well. Its brutality against the demonstrators cannot be attributed to the Shah, who apparently opposed violence. The decision to attack Khomeini’s supporters on June 5 was made by Alam, not the Shah.<sup>45</sup> The regime’s quick response and its lack of compunction to apply brute force was also attributable to the full support of the United States for the Shah’s policy toward the belligerent opposition.

The impact of the June Uprising on the ulama community was dramatic, too. Khomeini’s courage to confront the Shah politicized a whole generation of the ulama and left a legacy in Qom. His arrest and exile increased cooperation among the ulama in general and among his own students in particular. After Khomeini’s exile, seventy of his supporters were defrocked by the government and denied the right to use the pulpit. This small core kept Khomeini’s legacy alive. They were often jailed or sentenced to internal exile.

The events leading up to the uprising also paved the way for the formation of a new Islamic organization. Following Khomeini’s orders, three small Islamic groups formed the United Islamic Societies. Less than two months after Khomeini’s exile, Mansur was assassinated by Mohammad Bokharai. The government identified the twenty-year-old assassin as a member of the Fada’iyun-e Islam. Years later, the United Islamic Societies claimed responsibility for the assassination. Much mystery surrounds the assassination, but it is known that many of Khomeini’s supporters were arrested and jailed.

But the most significant consequence of the June Uprising was the emergence of Khomeini as religio-political leader. Khomeini’s themes of anti-Americanism, his fervent opposition to Zionism, his opposition to the Shah’s autocracy, and his emphasis on Islam attracted a large audience. Hossein Mahdavi, a member of the Central Committee of the National Front, was on the mark when he said: “He

[Khomeini] is regarded by Iranian intellectuals, even those who have little regard for Islam, as learned, extremely intelligent and courageous ... not since Mossadeq has one man brought so many diverse elements together.”<sup>46</sup> As Khomeini went into exile, his boldness to confront the Shah, his spiritual leadership, his ability to speak a language understood by the ordinary people, and his magnetism to unify divergent groups were qualities that combined in the national memory to become a national myth. That he emerged in 1979 as the symbol of the revolutionary movement was no historical accident.

## Notes

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20. Alexander and Nanes (1980), p. 313.