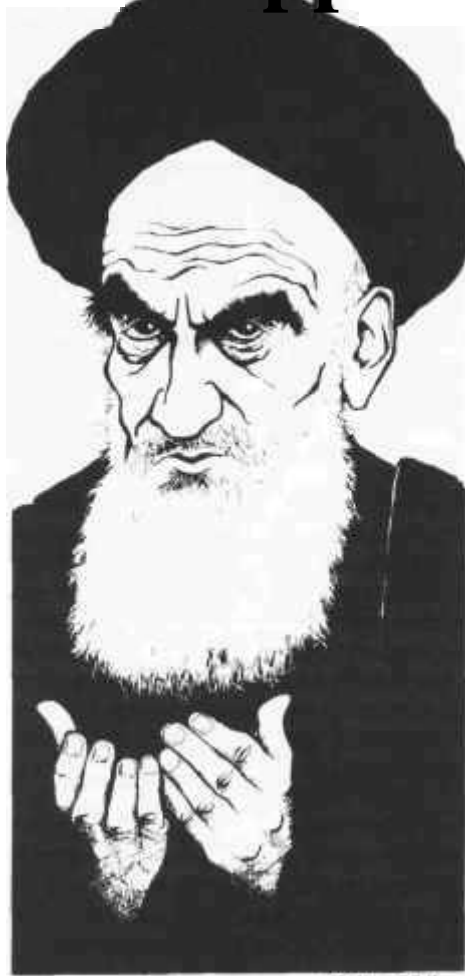


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The Iranian Revolution: What's Happening?



Looking at developments in Iran since the Shah left, a year ago, many people have been confused and distressed to see the mass movement which overthrew his regime itself become dominated by repressive policies and leaders. Many others have merely been confirmed in the view that the religious and nationalist aspects of that movement made it 'reactionary' from the start, with events over the last year reinforcing their hostility to the forces which opposed the Shah and foreign domination. While both of these views have some basis in reality, they do not go very far to *explain* the present situation in Iran. In this article I shall try to look at the kind of problems facing Iran, the nature of particular changes in the state and the economy, and the failure of the anti Shah movement to become a movement for progressive social and political change. I hope that this will go beyond whatever disappointment or dislike there is of aspects of the Iranian situation in order to grasp some of the reasons for what is happening.

Before beginning a discussion of the current situation it is worth recalling some of the more important features of Iranian society. In a previous article (*Marxism Today* April 1979) I pointed out the complex variety of that society. On the one hand it is characterised by an ethnic and linguistic diversity such that Persian is the first language of only half the Iranian population. Long established groups of Kurds in Western Iran, Azeri Turks to the northwest, and Arabs in the oil-rich area of Khuzistan to the southwest, together with Baluch and Turcic groups, are part of a *social* complexity that is also very important politically. Differences of language, culture and religion inspire

demands for regional rights and even autonomy that are very real for the new regime, as will be seen. This ethnic diversity is paralleled by social and economic complications arising from the partial and uneven nature of capitalist development in Iran. Modern manufacturing and business enterprises co-exist with older patterns of bazaar manufacture and trade, the failure of the Shah's regime to develop the economy created large numbers of unassimilated and underemployed rural migrants in towns, while the demands of the state also created an army of clerks, bureaucrats and other white-collar workers.

The revolt against the Shah's regime was the product of the social and economic discontent of a society facing inflation, lack of investment in productive activity *or* social welfare, and general political repression. The urban poor revolted against harsh deprivation and corruption, the small craft producers and traders of the bazaar against

foreign competition and the big business interests favoured by the Shah and foreign interests, while students and professionals opposed the repression and lack of opportunity provided by a regime that spent more on armaments and security than on *all* social or economic programmes put together. The common link between sections of all these groups was a tradition of religious politics that brought opposition to tyranny, desire for social progress, and commitment to the indigenous culture and society *against* foreign 'imperialist' intervention. This tradition had fuelled progressive movements taking up these issues for nearly a century and even the rise of secular progressive politics, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, had not eradicated it. The mosque as a centre for collective solidarity, protest and ideas, and the religious classes with their tradition of moral protest against the state and leadership or protection of the poor were thus the focus for the anti Shah movement.

The negative character of the movement

A fundamental problem for Iranians after the overthrow of the Shah was the *negative* character of their movement. People knew well enough what they opposed, but were (and are) unclear or divided as to what they supported in its place. Thus the Shah's departure marked a clear break with the past without any correspondingly clear commitment to a particular direction for Iran's future. The mass basis for opposition to the old regime was not matched by consensus or unity about desirable social or political changes. As has been said, the only common denominator for most people was the heritage of religious solidarity reinforcing demands

for national independence which linked the urban poor, small producers and traders and the religious hierarchy. The deep roots of this tradition and its close and long association with political struggles in a culture where secular political tradition is weak give it considerable popular force. This force re-emerged to political prominence from 25 years of repression during which ordinary Iranians had no chance to develop or modify the tradition through new political experiences. Thus the popular movement was influenced by a range of deeply felt but very limited views, untouched by the tests of debate and struggle.

With this situation in mind it is easier to understand, not only the popular support for the religious leaders of the movement, but also the limits to the development of popular political discussion. These in turn have meant that contradictions within the Iranian tradition of religious politics have emerged only slowly and are certainly nowhere near resolution. It is vital to understand the depth and reality of these contradictions if we are to grasp the political confusions facing many Iranians. On the one hand these deep religious and nationalist loyalties inspire anti-imperialist and popular politics concerned to liberate Iranian society from tyranny and foreign oppression and to improve it on the basis of human dignity and social justice. On the other hand the same loyalties inspire the repressive defence of conservative and chauvinist values which justifies the repression of women, of the non-Persian ethnic groups and of left wing political activity. Both these elements co-exist or intermingle uneasily, and one of the current features of the Iranian situation is the lack of clear attempts to separate the two trends — itself perhaps the mark of lack of political experience.

The Islamic State

These confusions and conflicts can clearly be seen if we look at the nature of the new 'Islamic' state and the way it attempts to deal with ethnic and social questions. The constitution enshrines various concepts derived from religious tradition and in particular the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini himself. It makes an original departure when it defines the status of the *mustaz'afin* — those whose weakness should be protected by society — reflecting a commitment to social responsibility and concern for the poor. At the same time it defines the position of women in relation to an abstract 'Islamic' ideal (glorified motherhood) rather than to their actual situation or to the demands now being made by women's groups in Iran. Thus the 'equality before the law' proclaimed by the constitution means very little, especially seen in

conjunction with 'Islamic' restrictions on female inheritance and divorce rights, and the annulment of the 1968 Family Protection Law which had made a start at giving women some rights to civil divorce and custody of children. Most crucial of all the constitution gives religious leadership a central role in a way which goes against not only secular views of politics, but also a section of religious opinion which argues for greater separation of religion and politics along the lines of the constitutional tradition going back to the first great popular anti-imperialist constitutional movement of 1906-11 (which also had religious support).

One exponent of this critical view of 'Khomeini's constitution' is another Ayatollah — Shariat-Madari — who in fact played a leading role in opposition to the Shah while Khomeini was in exile abroad and who has considerable following. What is significant about his position is that it represents not just rivalry between two ayatollahs, but a real political difference in which Shariat-Madari's view can claim as much 'legitimacy' and precedent as that of Khomeini. Support for Shariat-Madari is based on this less fundamentalist view of religion and politics and has attracted members of the traditionally religious (and 'constitutional') craft and trader community as well as members of the modern intelligentsia. However the other basis for his supporters is regional since he is an Azeri from the northwest who can command local loyalty. Azerbaijan (the Azeri province) is characterised by having its own local language (Azeri), considerable prosperity based on good agricultural areas and the substantial commercial and manufacturing city of Tabriz, and a long tradition of progressive politics going back to the days when Azeris were part of the most democratic wing of the constitutional movement before the First World War.

The ethnic minorities

Support for Shariat-Madari reflects not only the general conflicts over the nature of religion and the state in Iran, but also the specific problem of how Iranian 'nationalism' can deal with the important ethnic minorities of Iran. The demands of Azeris and Arabs for linguistic rights and of the Kurds for political autonomy are ones which the current leadership, based as it is on Persian speakers and Shi'a Islam, finds unacceptable. Concepts of Muslim brotherhood and national rights which are one part of the Iranian movement conflict with hostility to Sunni Muslims (like the Kurds and Turcoman) and to the regional and cultural aspirations of diverse elements in Iranian society (Kurds, Azeris, Arabs, Baluch,

Turcoman) which is also part of the religious nationalist tradition. Where these groups have economic importance as with the Arab presence near the oilfields or the role of rich Turcoman cotton farmers in the north-east, the new state is willing to take repressive action, seen at its most extreme in the military operations and ferocious 'justice' used against the Kurds, who have their own long tradition of struggle for autonomy. Thus the notion of an 'Islamic state' based on equality within the community is flawed by strong tendencies to repress some aspirations within the community — justified by reference to Islamic precedent.

Such developments reflect the continuing importance of religious loyalties within society at large, which means that many Iranians look to their version of Islam to change the society created under the Shah into something better. However they also reflect the conflicting implications of religion, and the dominance of a conservative rather than a progressive view of religion and society. The existence of the latter is shown by the considerable support for criticisms of the new state which has developed in organisations like the Muslim Republican Party in Azerbaijan (which backs Shariat-Madari). Such people boycotted the constitution, along with both marxist and muslim guerrillas and secular parties like the National Front (descended from the old radical nationalist movement) and the National Democratic Front. The real question is why this trend has not been stronger in challenging the popularity of Khomeini's simplistic conservatism, which has come to prevail as public orthodoxy.

The progressive forces

Any real alternative to that orthodoxy would need to be based on an effective alliance between secular and religious progressives which has failed to materialise. Many secular progressives have been cut off from any mass audience both by the divisive repression of the Shah's era, which prevented them from arguing their views, and also by the fact that they have not put those views in terms which will get across to ordinary people. The National Democratic Front, which began as an attempt to bring together all kinds of progressives, gradually moved towards the guerrilla groups and so came to speak for a narrow rather than a broad range of opinion. Those secular progressives who see the importance of being part of a broad movement, and hence of co-operating with religious activists, have sometimes seemed insufficiently critical of the conservative repressive aspect of religion. It is perhaps difficult to understand why the Tudeh Party, which rightly emphasises



not gone along with real government control of economic planning. Worker participation co-exists uneasily with government intervention in the manufacturing sector, just as the supposedly revolutionary local *komitehs* (= committees) are being used by self seeking expropriators of property or local powerful landlords defending their interests.

In a situation where Iranians desperately need economic policies and plans to overcome the problems of industry and agriculture starved of investment, skills and technology, the absence of effective government intervention for these purposes is significant. Talk of an 'Islamic economy' cannot overcome Iran's dependence on oil exports and food imports (hence the relevance of Carter's threatened sanctions against Iran), nor the heavy price paid by ordinary people for falling productivity and continued inflation. Khomeini's virulent anti-American propaganda campaign, which finds a ready response among those who rightly oppose the role of the US government, is in fact a diversionary *political* gambit, concealing the inability of those who think like him to produce helpful answers to the pressing issues facing the Iranian economy. Slogans of economic nationalism, and the personal asceticism of the religious leadership may appeal to many religious small entrepreneurs who support Khomeini, but they provide little practical benefit even for them. For others, lack of planning or investment or even efficient administration is a cause of real hardship.

The overthrow of the Shah unleashed diverse forces with diverse aspirations, ranging from urban workers attempting to share in management and profits in the workplaces to business and professional people trying to win favour with the politically dominant ayatollahs. On the one hand there are conflicts between government and workers in some workplaces which indicate attempts to repress workers' demands. On the other hand there is also evidence of continued support for the regime among ordinary people. The genuine nationalist fervour of the regime's pronouncements give it continued credibility, as does its maintenance of food supplies to the urban poor. In the chaotic situation where the flight of foreign and local businessmen and capital overlays the long term problems of slow economic development it must seem simpler for Iranians to focus on the 'American menace' as the source of all wrongs than to grapple with the real complexities of the situation. Coherent arguments about economic alternatives have made little impact on a mass audience, so that it is not surprising **that** traditional religious and anti-imperialist slogans are more acceptable.

progressives. It should also be said that the success of the conservative offensive has made it even harder than before to get accurate or detailed information about what is happening and so to judge it properly. What is clear is that there is a great need for the development of grassroots political debate and activity which can embrace religious and secular issues in a progressive way.

Economic background

However it makes little sense to discuss the dominance of Khomeini or the problems of progressives in Iran without putting them into a wider political and economic context. The upheaval of 1978 was a reaction against a regime which not only repressed political opposition and denied basic human rights, but also acted as the agent of international capitalist interests in oil and commerce, and of an unequal internal class structure. As we have seen the regime presided over economic stagnation and growing dependence on food imports, over inflation and urban poverty, over corruption and huge armaments purchases, all of which contributed to the grievances which brought people to oppose it. Again the unity in opposition to the economic oppressions of the old regime contrasts with lack of agreement about economic alternatives, as about political alternatives. This conflict is reflected in the current economic situation and government responses to it (or lack thereof). The 'nationalisation' of banks, factories and urban land has

the need to support a broad democratic and anti-imperialist political force, is more critical of Shariat-Madari than of Khomeini — particularly when its own existence is by no means secure under the present regime.

The fragmentation of the progressive forces made it all the easier for the conservatives to move against them last summer, closing down newspapers and organisations, harassing activists and denouncing 'anti-Islamic' activity. Since then it has been hard for progressives to put across their views let alone to organise effectively. This is probably less true for the Tudeh party which is not actually banned and has more of a disciplined organised base among professional and white-collar workers and among the small elite of oil workers. Naturally the religious character of this attack on the political rights of **the Left** has not **encouraged** the **development of links between secular and religious**

US interests

Iran's economic problems derive not only from the internal stresses which grew during the Shah's era and remain afterwards, but also from Iran's dependent role in the international capitalist system. As a source of oil, as a market for industrial goods, food and armaments, and as a borrower of foreign capital, Iran has been tied to that system at many levels. The collapse of the Shah's regime challenged the existing interests of foreign governments and companies, a fact reflected in the hostility of the western media towards the new regime and the popular movement. However, whatever the new possibilities for changing Iran's relationship to advanced industrial countries, many ties remain essential to the survival of its economy. Government pressure to revive Iran's oil production and negotiations for foreign loans and contracts followed logically from this fact. What effect this will have on western policies towards Iran is another question, since the end of the Shah's regime means more to the west than the disruption of trade and oil supplies.

The economic interests of America (or Britain) in Iran have always been intimately linked to more strategic international interests. The US government backed the Shah not only as an oil supplier, but also as an agent of US policies in the Middle East, and his removal was a real threat to American attempts to stage-manage settlements or prop up regimes in the area. The emergence of effective popular resistance to the Shah and the American interests he supported is not an example American governments would wish to see followed elsewhere. Whatever the content or credibility of Khomeini's current assertions about American spying there can be little doubt that the US government is pursuing policies which will safeguard its interests in Iran. It has already given aid to the military repression of the Kurds, presumably reckoning that weakening of Iran central government is not desirable. More generally American hostility towards an 'unco-operative' Iranian regime is a continuing background threat, and the possibility of American intervention very real.

In such circumstances it is all the more pity that US interests have been given a moral lever by the seizure of hostages (endorsed by the government), when the moral advantage could have been with the Iranians in their opposition to the provocative sheltering of the Shah, had they used better tactics. As with other issues we have discussed, a simplistic fundamentalist approach which finds widespread popular support since it draws on deep and justified anti-American

feeling, is in fact a positive threat to any progressive solution to Iran's international problems. At best it has reduced the sympathy of outsiders towards the Iranian situation, and at worst it creates the danger of a serious confrontation in which Iranians stand little chance of success, and where the overthrow of the present regime could be made to seem acceptable. Behind the short-term melodrama of the hostages lies the deep long-term problem of reshaping Iran's links with the wider world in such a way as to liberate it from dependency. Again the present leadership has substituted short-sighted gestures for any adequate approach, let alone answer to that problem.

Conclusions

Whether we consider the creation of a new political order, the development of economic life or the re-structuring of Iran's international relations, we return to the impasse from which we started. The strength of the popular movement in Iran and the religious leaders to whom it gives loyalty was measured by the *opposition* they mounted against the Shah and their *rejection* of the old order of police tyranny and foreign oppression. Popular opinion and experience were shaped by resistance to that order rather than by struggles for an alternative, giving rise to strongly *negative* interpretations of anti-imperialism, of national development or of social change. The capacity for *positive* political action to construct better alternatives has been limited partly by the real difficulties facing any dependent society trying to break out of the traps of unequal power and development, partly by the political vacuum created around popular politics by decades of repression. In that vacuum the known and trusted simplicities of deep rooted religious tradition have been able to establish dominance without much challenge, legitimised by the genuine contribution they have made to former struggles. The problem of any would-be challenge is to debate the issues posed by religious conservatism without doing so in such a way as to be cut off from potential participants in that debate. Elitist anti-clericalism is not enough.

Perhaps one should consider that the very negative character of the present Government will eventually reveal its inadequacy to meet the needs and aspirations of those who support it at present. If the Government has no policies to deal with unemployment, economic stagnation and inflation, or to meet demands for regional and ethnic rights, or to provide basic services, then it will be failing in areas which concern ordinary people very closely. In such a situation the question is in what direction people will turn as they lose

confidence in a leadership which fails to provide for them. A year ago I argued that the political vacuum just mentioned needed to be filled by debate, experiment and organisation, through which people's political experience and confidence would increase, and become the basis for more advanced political discussion and struggle. What has in fact happened in the last year is something of a stagnation of political development, disappointing perhaps for those who looked for swift progress, but not surprising in the light of the factors that have been described.

Perhaps one should also take account of the signs of change which can be found, especially if one turns from the national scene which tends to monopolise the attention of commentators. In some areas women have been working to spread literacy and political confidence among their sisters in the rural areas, carefully linking their work to broad based religious arguments for the emancipation of women. In Azerbaijan political contacts are bringing religious constitutionalists and modern intellectuals together to criticise fundamentalism. Such developments face resistance and harassment and their influence is as yet limited, but they are signs of at least the possibility of progressive change. The threats to such change are very great, not least from the great power rivalries that may make the Iranian situation along with that in Afghanistan a threat to world peace. If such threats can be avoided (a matter partly beyond Iranian control) then it still seems to be a question of a long period of time to develop the forces which could move forward from the negative achievements of the past to positive achievements in the future. •

