

The Shah seems to have primarily feared the rise of another Mosaddeq, a leftist challenge, or a military coup. He thus never relaxed his suppression of the Mosaddeqists or the left, and sought to eliminate renegade officers such as the former SAVAK chief, General Teymur Bakhtiar. Neither the Shah nor any of his secular supporters or opponents, nor indeed the more sober Islamists, imagined that circumstances would one day dramatically turn in favor of Khomeini. The Shah and royalists unwittingly but crucially contributed to the permissive conditions for Khomeini's unthinkable reemergence at the helm of the revolution in 1978-1979. He was enabled to portray himself as everything that the Shah was not. Following his exile, efforts to secure his return were abandoned, as he refused to relinquish politics.⁶² The Shah continued to maintain working relations with quietist clerics, avoiding them as much as possible but also appeasing them with minor concessions. Seeking to disrupt oppositional clerical activities, SAVAK remained watchful. But the regime lacked the intellectual resources and acuity for an accurate assessment of the situation in the country. The systematic discrediting of the constitutional process rendered the regime vulnerable to the force of the criticisms and arguments that Khomeini had come to appropriate and articulate or invoke. However, confident of the commanding strength of the regime, the Shah and his longtime adviser and court minister, Alam, regularly reassured each other that the power of the clerics had been permanently undermined.

⁶² American embassy, Tehran, to U.S. Department of State, August 17, 1965, POL 2 IRAN.

The Rise of Khomeinism

Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran

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INTRODUCTION

Ayatollah Khomeini's thinking was in the making for almost half a century. His views evolved over five distinct stages, beginning with political quietism and concluding with political absolutism. To be more precise, Khomeini's political life can be structured along five individual and interrelated signposts: Khomeini as the quietist (1920s-1940s); the constitutionalist (1940s-1971); the revolutionary (1971-1979); the *vali-ye faqih* (1979-1987); and the absolute *vali-ye faqih* (1987-1989). The young Khomeini's attitude to politics was congruent with the long-established tradition of political quietism and social conservatism of the clerical institution. Khomeini's transition from quietism to constitutionalism was prompted by the fear of secularism undermining the traditional role of the *ulema* in society.¹ During this period, as long as the *shariah* was enforced, the form of government was of little concern to Khomeini. However, Khomeini began to change his position in the 1970s. His theory of *velayat-e faqih* ("guardianship of the jurist") was a point of departure from constitutionalism to radicalism. According to the radical and revolutionary Khomeini, the institution of monarchy was illegitimate, and only an Islamic government bore the right to rule a Muslim population. He successfully transformed the last monarchy into Iran's first republic, institutionalizing his theory of *velayat-e faqih* and

¹ His first public statement came in *Kashf-e Asrar* (*The Discovery of Secrets*), where he sought a supervisory (*nezarat*) role for the *ulama*. This was in accord with Article 2 of the 1906 constitution, suggested by Shaykh Fazlollah Nouri, which provided for a clerical committee to supervise laws passed by the *Majlis* (parliament).

turning from revolutionary into *vali-ye faqih* and later absolute (*mot-laqeh*) *vali-ye faqih*.

From December 1987 until his death in June 1989, Khomeini issued various decrees and expressed absolute authority in a number of areas. Above all, Khomeini was concerned about the fate of the state he had created. The Iran-Iraq war (1981–1988), a decision over his succession, and the ever-increasing disagreements over socio-economic and cultural policies between the regime's factions pushed Khomeini towards political absolutism. In January 1988, he made it clear that "the government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any *shariah* agreement that it has conducted with people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam."² Moreover, the 1989 amended constitution expanded the power of the *faqih* by transferring the president's task of coordinating the three branches of government to the office of the *velayat-e faqih*. It made it explicit that the *vali-ye faqih* held "absolute" power by adding the phrase "motlaqeh" to Articles 107–110, defining his total authority.³ In sum, Khomeini as the absolute *vali-ye faqih* came to adopt the view that all aspects of Islam were subordinate to the interests of the Islamic state.

In this chapter, we will examine the third stage of Khomeini's life, within which the revolutionary conditions transformed him from a quietest/constitutionalist cleric into a revolutionary Ayatollah. To that end, this chapter addresses the following questions: Why and how did Khomeinism become the hegemonic voice not only of Iranian Shi'ism, but also of the opposition to the Shah's regime? How did Khomeinism successfully isolate contemporary and traditional discourses in Iran? What factors prevented other religious and secular discourses from being able to compete with Khomeinism? What factors contributed to the success of one among many? To answer these questions, it is the purpose of this chapter to analyze and contextualize the making of Khomeinism⁴ under the Shah's regime during its final years leading up to the revolution of 1979.

² Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 74.

³ More importantly, Article 109 of the amended constitution separated the position of the *marji'a* from that of the *faqih*; setting the stage for the selection of a new *vali-ye faqih* who could be a middle-ranking cleric. Paradoxically, the priority Khomeini granted to the interests of the state led him to revive his own theory of the *velayat-e faqih* by reducing the theological qualifications needed, and separating the position of the *marji'a* from that of the *faqih*.

⁴ See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

Many scholars admit that the causes and outcomes of revolutionary conditions are better explained once the role and function of structures and agencies are equally and properly acknowledged. Any one-sided consideration of the voluntarist position (agency without structural limits) or structuralist position (structures without agency) undermines the complex and dialectical relations between structure and agency. This dialectical relation suggests that there is always a combination of "a willful action of knowledgeable actors within constraints and possibilities supplied by pre-existing structures."⁵ There is always a web of possibilities for agency "to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits." The agents are thus "both active and structured."⁶ In this chapter, I will keep an equal distance from structural determinism and extreme voluntarism by examining the extent to which structural constraints and the activities of agencies contributed to the hegemony of Khomeinism. An operational definition of structure and agency will clarify my argument. I will ask how and why structural constraints evolved under the Shah's regime in three major forms: "petrolic neo-sultanism," uneven development, and the global structure of power during the Cold War. In the following section, I will argue that agency was able to "shift strategic postures within the margins of maneuverability."⁷ This was a process engendered by structural constraints, and played out through the following three channels: radical-populist culture, traditional institutions, and charismatic clerical leadership. This dialectical approach provides a proper link between structural constraints and political action, and provides a better understanding of the revolutionary conditions leading up to the rise and hegemony of Khomeinism in the late 1970s.

REVOLUTIONARY CONDITIONS: STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Structural constraints were rooted in the nature of the Shah's land reforms in the 1960's and increased oil revenues in the 1970s, which intensified the sultanistic nature of the regime and made the state the sole dominant actor in the economic and political structure of Iran. The land reforms also deepened the uneven structure of development, and enlarged the

⁵ William H. Sewell Jr., "Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case," *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), pp. 57–85, p. 60.

⁶ Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 29.

⁷ Richard Snyder, "Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes: Combining Structural and Voluntarist Perspectives" in H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes*, (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 59–60.

gap between rich and poor, creating a marginalized social class in the process. The increased oil revenue made the state more independent of domestic forces, but increased Iran's dependency on the United States and foreign control over its economic and internal affairs. The first priority of the state was to strengthen its military forces and turn Iran into a regional power allied with the United States. In this regard, a combination of Iran's geopolitical position and the international structure of power during the Cold War provided the Shah with an opportunity to turn his regime into the closest regional ally of the United States. These structural constraints – petrolic neo-sultanism, uneven development, and the global structure of power – contributed to the revolutionary conditions of the 1970s.

PETROLIC NEO-SULTANISM

Mohammad Reza Shah came to power in 1941 and was overthrown in 1979. The years 1941–1953 are characterized as a period when the “new Shah largely depended on the landlord-*ulama* alliance, although he was also keen to enhance his personal power through the army as well as foreign support.”⁸ From 1951 to 1953, as the nationalist and liberal democrat Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq struggled to establish a parliamentary democracy and nationalize Iran's oil industries, the Shah ruled the country in name only. Economic constraints, together with hostility “from the Shah, parts of the army, landlords, the religious establishment, Britain, and in the end America” led to the overthrow of Mosaddeq in a 1953 coup.⁹ From 1953 to 1963, the post-coup regime took on the form of authoritarianism. Although politically and economically supported by the United States, it was backed by the landlords, religious establishment, and army. In the meantime, the Shah's personal power increased at the expense of his domestic allies. However, a combination of domestic economic crises during the years 1960–1962 and pressure from the U.S. administration under President Kennedy forced the Shah to listen to the regime's opposition, which suggested implementing a land reform.¹⁰ However, the reform cabinet did not last, and Prime Minister Amini was forced to resign. The land reform, now diluted with

⁸ Homa Katouzian, “The Pahlavi Regime in Iran” in H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 187.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

less emphasis on social changes, was to be instrumental in consolidating the Shah's personal power. The Shah won his White Revolution in a “concocted referendum” in January 1963,¹¹ but soon lost the confidence of both traditional and modern classes: “The White Revolution had been designed to preempt a Red Revolution. Instead, it paved the way for an Islamic Revolution.”¹²

The Shah's policy of autocratic modernization soon undermined the authority of the clerical establishment. In 1967, the *Majlis* – ordered by the Shah – passed the Family Protection Law, which conflicted with *sharia* and challenged the social status of the clerical institution.¹³ The creation of the Literacy Corps was regarded as defying the traditional role of the clergy in the education system. In the mid-1970s, the regime began closing down religious institutions and lecture halls. It also dissolved all university-based religious student associations, forbade various religious figures from delivering public lectures, and shut down a number of religious publishing centers.¹⁴ Likewise, the regime sought control over the bazaar in a number of ways: it blamed *bazaaris* for inflation; and fined, imprisoned, and banned some *bazaaris* from doing business.¹⁵ It also dissolved the bazaar's independent guilds and created a state-led chamber of commerce.

Equally important, the Shah's White Revolution soon came into conflict with the new industrial class: the regime increased business taxes by 80 percent, decreased industrial profit margins by 15 percent, and ordered hundreds of companies to sell 49 percent of their shares to their own workers and the general public.¹⁶ Moreover, tax exemption and state licensing was granted to a close circle of clients attached to the regime. The narrow social base and near absence of regime links with civil society discouraged pro-business and capitalist classes from supporting the regime and left the social base of the regime restricted to the ruler

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹² Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 140.

¹³ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 444.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 444. In February 1975, the Shah changed the official calendar of the country from its base, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (*Hejri*), to the start of the Achaemenian monarchical reign in what came to be known as the Shahanshahi calendar date.

¹⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), p. 17.

¹⁶ Hossein Bashiriyyeh, *The State and Revolution in Iran, 1962–1982* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 92.

and his clients.¹⁷ For the new middle class, “the Shah’s modernization program was not criticized for being modern, but because it failed to achieve modernity in the fullest meaning of the term.”¹⁸ The new middle class now had every reason to raise its voice. The Shah’s regime, in sum, became increasingly isolated among the traditional and modern middle classes in the 1970s. The riot of June 1963, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was defeated. However, it transformed him into the national figurehead that would lead a revolutionary mass movement in 1979.

Neo-sultanism, or the re-emergence of sultanism in a modern guise, became the main characteristic of the regime during its final years leading up to the revolution of 1979. As Theda Skocpol observed, from 1963 to 1977 the Shah was himself the state; not merely a “figurehead monarch, but rather a practicing patrimonial absolutist ... without him the state could not function.”¹⁹ Similarly, Anthony Parsons argues that “to all intents and purposes, the Shah was the regime: monarch and the state had become virtually synonymous.”²⁰

The Shah merely paid lip service to the constitution and modern political procedures, and was rather thankful that Iran under his rule was not “suffering” from democracy. “Thank God,” he said to his court minister, Alam, “we in Iran have neither the desire nor the need to suffer from democracy.”²¹ Given the Shah’s views on democracy, Iran’s parliament – the *Majlis* – became merely a rubber stamp for his policies. At this time, the opposition were forbidden from establishing political parties, and there was thus no genuine electoral competition. At the same time, the Shah created a specious two-party system headed by his confidants. The Melliyoon (Nationalists) and the pseudo-oppositional Mardom (People’s) parties were both founded on the Shah’s order, but soon collapsed because of the Shah’s intolerance of even limited competition between political parties. In 1963, by which time the regime had turned into a fully neo-sultanistic state, the Shah effectively established a one-party system by transferring the Melliyoon party into Iran-e Novin (New

¹⁷ H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes*, (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 20.

¹⁸ Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 76.

¹⁹ Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 245.

²⁰ Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran, 1974–79* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 19.

²¹ Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I*, Alinaghi Alikhani, ed. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991), p. 233.

Iran), headed by then-Prime Minister Hasanali Mansur. In March 1975, the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) party was formed under the order of the Shah to implement his neo-sultanistic ideology as a single-party system. The Shah’s single-party system demonstrated the regime’s patrimonialism and arbitrariness under the guise of modernization and Westernization. The Shah, a modernizing autocrat, dissolved all (semi) independent organizations and utilized a populist semi-fascist form of mobilization to hide the regime’s crisis – forcing everybody to join the party or leave the country. In this sense, the regime became a clear example of neo-sultanism.

Moreover, the state became relatively alienated from society. Society had a limited impact on the state, not least because the state depended not on its citizens but on oil income to sustain itself. With the massive rise of oil prices in the early 1970s, Iran became a “rentier” state with little taxation, and consequently, little representation of its citizens. Oil financed more than 90 percent of imports and 80 percent of the annual budget, and allowed the state to disregard its internal tax base. Thus, the state’s major relationships with society were mediated via its expenditures on development projects, and not through taxation. According to Skocpol, the Shah’s regime was a “rentier state” because it “did not rule through, or in alliance with, any independent social class.”²² In class terms then, the state was in a hegemonic position vis-à-vis the dominant social classes.

The more the Shah fused his power with that of the state and relied on the state’s dependent-coercive apparatus, oil revenues, and the United States the more he abstracted himself from society.²³ In the end, the petrolic-neo-sultanistic state proved extremely fragile and was unable to sustain itself in the face of the revolutionary process overwhelming it.

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

The Shah’s regime was built around an advanced state apparatus that exercised power arbitrarily, and without the decisive involvement of the main strata of Iranian society. This disjuncture between state and society had a negative impact on the regime’s development policies, and caused the conditions for uneven development in three different but interrelated ways. First, uneven development lent itself to discrepancies between

²² Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, p. 244.

²³ David Jorjani, “Revolution in the Semi-Periphery: The Case of Iran” in Terry Boswell (ed.) *Revolution in the World System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 136.

economic and political progress. As a result, the political structure lagged far behind the economic modernization of the country. In other words, the relatively sound economic development of the 1960s and 1970s was achieved at the expense of political reforms. Although much of the oil revenue was invested in the industrial infrastructure of Iran, problems emerged when the regime failed to reconcile its contradictory neo-sultanistic nature with the emerging demands for political participation.²⁴ This structural disequilibrium between economic and political development meant that the Shah failed to implement political change appropriate to the economic and social upheavals taking place in Iranian society. The failure to delegate sustainable state-society relations resulted in the collapse of the links between social and political structures, obstructing the communication of social grievances to the state, and eventually widening the existing gap between the social forces and political elites.²⁵

After the coup d'état of 1953 engineered by MI6 and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reinstated the Shah's monarchy, he largely failed to restore his legitimacy in the eyes of the middle class. The Shah never fully trusted the middle class, and did not allow them to engage in meaningful political participation. The middle class, in return, was politically, culturally, and (in later years) economically dissatisfied with the regime: "In an age of republicanism, radicalism and nationalism, the Pahlavi regime appeared in the eyes of the intelligentsia to favor monarchism, conservatism, and Western imperialism."²⁶

Second, uneven development polarized Iran's economic structure, and formed a dual society with conflicting traditional and semi-industrial economies. The Shah's policy of economic development relied not on the people but on its "petrolic despotism" The regime's neo-sultanistic tendencies broke the last remaining historical connections between the *bazaaris* and the political system. For instance, in 1963, the bazaar's share of domestic trade in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 9.4 percent; in 1977-1978, its share sharply declined to 5.7 percent.²⁷ The *bazaaris* were to be the main target of the regime, given the Shah's failure to deal with the economic crisis. The regime blamed *bazaaris* for inflation, and launched an "anti-profiteering crusade" to control their businesses. As a result, many *bazaaris* were fined, and others were imprisoned

²⁴ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, pp. 419-448.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

²⁶ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p. 17.

²⁷ John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 67.

and banned from doing business.²⁸ The Rastakhiz party dissolved all the independent guilds and created a chamber of commerce whose members were appointed by the state. The regime sought control of the bazaar by importing a large amount of goods to undercut their trade, and preparing to replace the location of Tehran's bazaar with a new freeway.

The Shah's White Revolution polarized the socio-economic system, frustrating both traditional and modern classes, and creating a new dissatisfied social class of the urban poor. The urban poor emerged from the failure of the Shah's land reform, and consisted largely of unfortunate rural migrants – mostly farmers or those with agricultural jobs – that were equally "unfortunate participants in the new urban social structure of the country."²⁹ Land reform had failed because it failed to distribute large enough land to support families to one-half of the landless peasantry, and did not distribute any land at all to the other half, leaving them with no option but to migrate to major cities.³⁰ Moreover, the land reform did not provide capital for the peasants who had received land, which was instead unevenly and unsuccessfully allocated to highly mechanized farms and agribusiness corporations. The Shah's version of modernization did little to improve the lives of urban migrants. These urban migrants quickly realized that they would not "escape from marginality," but, rather, would once again find themselves in a "struggle for subsistence."³¹ The Shah's uneven development satisfied neither the traditional nor the modern sectors of agriculture. It turned Iran from a net food exporter in the 1960s to a net importer of agricultural products, costing \$1 billion annually in the 1970s.³²

Third, Iran's socio-economic structure under the Shah was also influenced by the world economic system. This is explained by the theory of "dependent development." After 1953, relations between the Shah and

²⁸ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p. 17.

²⁹ Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*, p. 75. Within a decade (1966-1976), Iran's urban population rose from 38 percent to 47 percent, and major cities received more than 2 million rural migrants: "The tide of landless peasants pouring into the cities in search of work rose from around 30,000 a year in the 1930s and 130,000 annually from 1941 to 1956, to 250,000 a year for 1957-1966 and 330,000 a year between 1967 and 1976." (See John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 337).

³⁰ John Foran, "The Iranian Revolution of 1977-79: A Challenge for Social Theory" in John Foran (ed.) *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 167-168.

³¹ Farhad Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrants Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics* (New York: New York View Press, 1980), p. 45.

³² Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 447.

the West were rapidly fortified. In the 1960's, international pressure and domestic needs pushed the regime to open up the economy to foreign investment. This and the foreign exchange earnings from national oil resources moved the country from periphery to semi-periphery in the global capitalist system. Foreign trade increased from \$162 million in 1954 to \$42 billion by 1978. The GDP grew at 10.8 percent annually from 1963 to 1978, and the GNP rose from \$3 billion in 1953 to \$53 billion in 1977.³³ Despite these achievements, the Shah's policy of development failed to serve the interests of both traditional and modern social classes, as it was primarily aimed at serving foreign business interests. Fuelled by oil revenues and in response to the economic crisis, the Shah launched his land reform and pushed for rapid industrialization and urbanization. The regime's dependent development plan destroyed traditional agriculture, but failed to create a modern alternative – not least because of the \$2.6 billion annual food imports and extensive foreign agribusiness operations. The traditional bazaar economy and the guild artisans were squeezed out of the market with cheap imports, and suffered from arbitrary measures implemented by the state.³⁴

GLOBAL STRUCTURE OF POWER

The global structure of power during the Cold War was a major factor in determining the conditions favorable to the making of Khomeinism in a number of ways. First, under the shadow of the Cold War, progressive liberal and leftist individuals, ideas, and institutions were considered by the regime as major threats. The Shah's policies after 1953 undermined republican institutions in Iranian politics, and destroyed secular and progressive parties among the liberals and leftists. But the traditional clerical institutions remained almost untouched, largely because of the long history of clerical quietism and passive cooperation with the state. During the Cold War, the main enemy of the West and Western allies was communism. The Shah sought to use the conservative religious tradition of the clerical establishment to confront the immediate threat of Marxism and (in his phraseology) "Islamic Marxism." Both the regime of the Shah and the clerical establishment for different reasons were anti-communist. Hence, the anti-communist sentiments of the clerical establishment provided a

³³ Foran, "The Iranian Revolution of 1977-79: A Challenge for Social Theory," pp. 167-168.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

temporary and relatively safe institutional haven for the clergy. Second, the relationship between the United States and the Shah was characterized by patron-client dependency. The foreign patron's supply of critical military aid and material resources was used by the regime to help fuel its domestic patronage networks. This in fact allowed "the ruler to detach his repressive state apparatus from its social base and dispense with domestic coalition building."³⁵ The dependence on American patronage further contributed to the rise of revolutionary conditions. Third, "the world-system conjuncture" contributed to the revolutionary process "in the sense that the core world power did not aggressively intervene to prevent it."³⁶ Iran joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955 (later the Central Treaty Organisation or CENTO), which was established to prevent communist advances into West Asia.³⁷ The Shah henceforth became the "policeman" of the Persian Gulf, and received access to the most advanced conventional arms and military equipment in the West. In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. military sales to Iran reached some \$20 billion.³⁸

Under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, U.S. foreign policy undertook a departure from the foreign policy of the Nixon era. In his dealings with the Shah, Carter highlighted the human rights situation in Iran, and insisted on limited liberalization. In turn, the Shah released some political prisoners and opened up the political atmosphere without implementing any major reforms. But President Carter remained unsure of whether the United States should continue its support for the Shah. Because Carter did not have strong feelings towards the Shah, nor a policy to deal with the revolution, the Shah would be left uncertain about how to respond to the coming revolutionary crisis.

THE REVOLUTIONARY CONDITIONS: AGENTIAL ACTORS/FACTORS

Karl Marx wrote that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted

³⁵ Richard Snyder, "Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes: Combining Structural and Voluntarist Perspectives," p. 58.

³⁶ Foran, "The Iranian Revolution of 1977-79: A Challenge for Social Theory," pp. 170-171.

³⁷ Fred Halliday, *Iran, Dictatorship and Development* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 252.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-280.

from the past.”³⁹ Marx’s account of the relationship between structure and agency suggests that there is a web of possibilities for an agent to make choices, but only within certain constraints set by pre-existing structures. Equally important, however, is the fact that political actors are not “passive carriers of fixed interests and identities derived from positions in institutional or social structures.” Agents are not mechanically determined by structure, and are instead “both active and structured,”⁴⁰ and all existing social structures are products of human actions invested with cultural meanings.⁴¹ In order to emphasize this agency of Iranians in the build-up to the revolution, the next section will examine how and why Khomeinism as an idea and movement took advantage of structural opportunities. It will be argued that the radical-populist culture of Iran in the 1970s, the influence of traditional institutions, and the charismatic clerical leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini constituted the trilogy of ideas, institutions, and individuals that were the three most important factors that turned Khomeinism into the dominant voice of the opposition to the Shah.

THE HEGEMONY OF RADICAL-POPULIST CULTURE

As indicated, there is a dynamic interaction between culture and social structure. Whereas structural conditions affect the hegemonic capacity of a particular political culture, the capacity of a political culture “to organize social actions affects the historical opportunities actors are able to seize.”⁴² Political actors often strategically appropriate aspects of cultural heritage under revolutionary conditions. In other words, the question is not “to try to estimate how much culture shapes action” but instead “how culture is used by actors, how cultural elements constrain or facilitate patterns of action, [and] what aspects of a cultural heritage have enduring effects on action.”⁴³ These strategies of action are established by ideologies, which are defined as highly articulated belief systems aiming

³⁹ Karl Marx, “The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in R. C. Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

⁴⁰ Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory*, p. 29.

⁴¹ Michael Taylor, “Structure, Culture, and Action in the Explanation of Social Change” in William Booth et al. (eds.) *Politics and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 123.

⁴² Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), p. 283.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“to offer a unified answer to problems of social action.”⁴⁴ Ideologies are different from cultural traditions, but under certain historical circumstances – such as a revolution – cultural traditions and religious systems can become transformed into ideologies. As Clifford Geertz observes, ideologies such as ideological Islam come “to ‘hold’ rather than be ‘held’ by one’s beliefs.”⁴⁵

In this approach, the cultural system is not “unified” but instead contains “chunks of culture, each with its own history and resources for constructing organized strategies of action.”⁴⁶ Pre-revolutionary Iran maintained such chunks of cultural and political discourses. These included Khomeinism, Ali Shariati’s Islamic-left ideology, Mehdi Bazargan’s liberal-democratic Islam, and socialist guerrilla groups that experimented with Islamic and secular variants within a nationalist and Marxist framework.⁴⁷

KHOMEINISM

Although pre-revolutionary Iran never experienced a homogeneous Islamist political culture, Khomeinism dominated the revolutionary field. Khomeinism was built around a political and pragmatic reinterpretation of religious scripture that evolved into revolutionary, and is neither symbolic of a pre-modern movement nor a post-modern phenomenon. This was not traditionalism, as Ayatollah Khomeini departed radically from the Shi’i tradition of political quietism in favor of an activist ideology emphasizing socio-political change. Khomeinism cannot be regarded as fundamentalism either, as the term “fundamentalism” derived from American Protestantism and implies the literal interpretation of scriptural texts.

Similarly, in spite of its critique of modernity, Khomeinism is not a post-modern phenomenon. Khomeinism developed within the context of intellectual absolutism, insisting on the absolute representation of the Truth. Central to Khomeinism is its anti-hermeneutic claim, emphasizing

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁴⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 61.

⁴⁶ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” p. 283.

⁴⁷ See also John Foran, *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran*, pp. 173–175; Valentine Moghadam, “Islamic Populism, Class, and Gender in Post-Revolutionary Iran” in Foran (ed.) *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran*, pp. 189–222 and Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

that the core meaning of the Quran is absolutely clear and not open to interpretation. Post-modernity is largely anti-foundational, but – like other versions of Islamism – Khomeinism insists on some absolute, a priori foundation as the basis of its ideology. Finally, it makes little sense to characterize Khomeinism as anti-modern or even pre-modern, given its profound engagement with the modern world such as its ability to equip itself with modern technologies of organization, surveillance, warfare, propaganda, and politics.⁴⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini's ideologized account of the Shi'i tradition offered Iranians respite from the ill effects of absolutism and imperialism, and led to the formation of a nationwide, populist revolutionary coalition. His political critique of the Shah's absolutism and Western imperialism was more renowned than his theory of the *velayat-e faqih*. A very general concept of his theory was prominent amongst segments of clerics, but his populist discourse appealed to other social forces.

In the early 1970s, "Khomeini was the first Shiite jurist to open the discussion (*fath-e bab*) of "Islamic government" in a work of jurisprudence."⁴⁹ The theory of Islamic government was a point of departure from constitutionalism. Khomeini began to change his position by suggesting that the institution of monarchy itself was illegitimate, and that Muslims should be ruled by an Islamic government. He stated that "the Islamic government is constitutional in the sense that the rulers are bound by a collection of conditions defined by the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. ... In this system of government sovereignty originates in God, and law is the word of God."⁵⁰ Through a series of lectures delivered in Najaf in the early 1970s, he developed the novel idea that a just, knowledgeable, and faithful *faqih* was obliged to exercise both religious and political power in the absence of the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'i. "The ruler," Khomeini argued, "must have two characteristics: knowledge of the law and justice. He must have knowledge of the law because Islamic

⁴⁸ Khomeinism refashioned and institutionalized a modern theocracy. As Abrahamian observes, the "whole constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic was modeled less on the early caliphate than on de Gaulle's Fifth Republic." Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Said Amir Arjomand, "Authority in Shiism and Constitutional Development in the Islamic Republic of Iran" in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.) *The Twelver Shia in the Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Brill, Netherlands: Tuta Pallace, 2001), p. 301.

⁵⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government" in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.) *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*, (London: Mizan Press, 1981) p. 55.

government is the rule of law and not the arbitrary rule of persons. In this sense only the *faqih* can be the righteous ruler."⁵¹

Khomeini's theory of the *velayat-e faqih* was a radical departure from the dominant traditional trends in Shi'ism.⁵² The theory challenged the conventional interpretation of the Shi'i doctrine of *Imamat*, which states that the legitimate leadership of the Muslim community belongs to the Prophet and his twelve successors or Imams. Khomeini proposed the novel idea that "our duty to preserve Islam" by establishing an Islamic government "is one of the most important obligations incumbent upon us; it is more necessary even than prayer and fasting."⁵³ He suggested the task of creating an Islamic government that can be justified on the basis of the "secondary ordinances" (*ahkam-e sanaviye*), where the "primary ordinances" (*shariah* law) are silent or not explicit.⁵⁴

Ayatollah Khomeini established his doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* on two traditional and rational grounds.⁵⁵ Government is an essential component of Islam because the Prophet himself created an Islamic state. Moreover, *shariah* law cannot be fully implemented without an Islamic state; Islamic government is the only legitimate tool to put Islamic rules into practice. For Khomeini, Muslims cannot and should not live under un-Islamic rule, and the implementation of *shariah* law should not be discontinued during the Great Occultation: "Did God limit the validity of His laws to two hundred years? Was everything pertaining to Islam meant to be abandoned after the Lesser Occultation?"⁵⁶ In this regard, the just *vali-ye faqih* is the only qualified ruler to undertake such a task in the absence of the Prophet and Imams.

Khomeini the constitutionalist (1940s-1971) stated the following: "Whatever is in [constitutional] accord with the law of Islam we shall accept and whatever is opposed to Islam, even if it is the constitution, we shall oppose."⁵⁷ However, Khomeini the revolutionary (1971-1979)

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Although Khomeini's interpretation of the theory of the *velayat-e faqih* was new, the concept was not new to the Shi'i tradition. For an insightful discussion, see Farhang Rajaei, *Khomeini on Man, the State and International Politics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

⁵³ Khomeini, "Islamic Government," p. 75.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

⁵⁵ Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶ Khomeini, "Islamic Government," p. 42.

⁵⁷ Huzeh-e Elmeyeh, *Zendeginameh-e Imam Khomeini (A Biography of Imam Khomeini)* (Tehran, n.d.), p. 95.

increasingly came to believe that colonialism was a greater threat, “and thus shifted his emphasis from the constitution to Islam.”⁵⁸ He argued that the Pahlavi regime was bent on destroying Islam because only Islam and the *ulema* could prevent the onslaught of colonialism.⁵⁹ Khomeini the revolutionary rejected constitutionalism and monarchy: “Islam is fundamentally opposed to the whole notion of monarchy,” he argued, because it is one of the most shameful “reactionary manifestations.”⁶⁰

Why and how did Khomeini the constitutionalist become a revolutionary? Why did this change occur in the 1970s? Ayatollah Khomeini remained in close contact with events in Iran during his years in exile, and was deeply influenced by the new ideas and radical trends in the country. For instance, it is very likely that he read Jalal Al-e Ahmad's (1923–1969) influential pamphlet “Gharbzadegi” (“Westoxification”), given that he frequently used the term in the late 1970s. Moreover, new waves of radical Islam reached Khomeini via young militant clerics influenced by Iran's People's Mojahedin Organization. In addition, Iranian student associations in Europe and North America that were impressed by Ali Shariati's ideas further drove Khomeini towards radicalism.⁶¹ In the 1970s, Khomeini increasingly urged Iranians to rise up against the aggression of the “Zionist regime” (Israel) and to oppose the Shah's friendly relations with the country. He attacked the Shah for creating the Rastakhiz Party, and opposed replacing Iran's Islamic calendar with an imperial one known as the Shahanshahi calendar. He also condemned the Shah's celebration of 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. In short, by the 1970s, Khomeini had transformed into a populist and revolutionary Ayatollah with an ability to communicate with different strata of society within Iran and beyond.

ALI SHARIATI'S RADICAL-LEFT ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY AND OTHER MOVEMENTS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was a man of his time, as his thinking was deeply influenced by the socio-political conditions of pre-revolutionary

⁵⁸ Bashiriyeh, *State and Revolution in Iran, 1962–1982*, pp. 59–60.

⁵⁹ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Khomeini va Jonbesh: Majmueh-ye Nameha va Sokhanraniha (A Collection of Khomeini's Letters and Speeches)* (Tehran: 1352/1973), pp. 58–60; 68–69.

⁶⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, “October 31, 1971, The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islam” in Algar (ed., trans.) *Islam and Revolution 1: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941–1980)*, p. 202.

⁶¹ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Learning and Power in Modern Iran* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986), p. 303.

Iran. He was profoundly critical of the passive and quietist clergy, and argued that individual and social responsibilities were central to Islam. According to Shariati, it was the people and not God that were responsible for their own destiny. He contended strongly that Islam encouraged and endorsed social justice, and criticised the Shah's regime's brutal despotism as he called for an Islam that sought freedom. The core of Shariati's discourse emphasized freedom (*azadi*), equality (*barabari*), and gnosis (*irfan*). In other words, his discourse was about freedom and democracy without capitalism; social justice and socialism without authoritarianism; and modern religion without clericalism. In his writings, he provided a critique of power, political dictatorship (*esetbdad*), material injustice (*estesmar*), and religious alienation (*estehmar*). He has been regarded as the engineer of “a radical layman's religion that disassociated itself from the traditional clergy and associated itself with the secular trinity of social revolution, technological innovation, and cultural self-assertion.” As such, he “produced exactly what the young intelligentsia craved.”⁶²

Shariati “was a master synthesizer and himself a synthesis.”⁶³ He was “an individualist at war with individualism and a militant of social cause, ever evading the masses. A firm believer in the inevitability of change and the necessity of adaptation, he was a modernist who detested the persistence of outmoded traditions, customs and institutions.”⁶⁴ Ali Shariati was a “synthesis of the cultural and political traditions of the east and the west,” and he “looked at the east through western eyes and at the west through eastern eyes.”⁶⁵ Shariati articulated a humanistic Islamic discourse, which appealed to the educated middle class. He accused the clergy of “monopolistic control” over the interpretation of Islam in order to set up a clerical despotism (*estebdade ruhani*), which would be “the worst and the most oppressive form of despotism possible in human history.”⁶⁶ He argued that throughout history, it was the people and not the privileged class that received the message of God. “It was precisely over the issue of clerical authority” that Shariati called for an Islamic Reformation.⁶⁷ But an Islamic Reformation, Abrahamian observes,

⁶² Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 473.

⁶³ Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), p. 370.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, vol. x (Tehran: Ferdowsi, 1360/1981), p. 56.

⁶⁷ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p. 119.

remained a challenging task, as the clergy (*ulama*) provided the dominant interpretation of Islam over the centuries.⁶⁸

In Shariati's view, Iran's progress depended on raising the consciousness of the people by radically transforming Iran's social order, which required a primarily social and not merely political revolution. According to Shariati, Iran still remained in the "age of faith," comparable to Europe in the late feudal era on the eve of the European Renaissance. The *rushanfekran* (intelligentsia), Shariati argued, represented the critical conscience of society, and were thus obliged to launch a "renaissance" and "reformation." Shariati would later change this position in *Ummat va Emamat*, and argue in *Bazgasht* that the intelligentsia should not lead the people. Shariati increasingly came to believe that the role of the intellectuals should be to provide critical analysis of the material reality surrounding them, instead of providing a future blueprint for the people.

That radical and critical account of the status quo in Iran was in many ways congruent with the demands of the university students, middle class intellectuals, and urban classes of workers and migrants. Shariati's popularity came to exceed almost all other religious and secular intellectuals in pre-revolutionary Iran. Hence, Shariati is widely regarded as the Voltaire of the 1979 revolution. However, he was "ignored by the secularists, admonished by the clerics, and punished by the Shah's regime. ... The first camp considered him peripheral, the second treated him as an *enfant terrible*, and the third viewed him as a troublesome Islamic-Marxist who needed to be silenced."⁶⁹ Shariati did not even fit the mould of the pioneers of "liberal Islam" in pre-revolutionary Iran, who sought political power through principles of constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy by advocating for the accommodation of Islam with liberal democracy. Mehdi Bazargan (1905–1990), Yadollah Sahabi (1905–2002), and to some degree the liberal cleric Mahmood Taleghani (1911–1979) and their associated political party – the Liberation Movement of Iran – represented the politics of liberal Islam. Its supporters were mostly formed among the modern bourgeoisie, some merchants, the modern middle class, a small segment of the clergy, and some segments of students and teachers. On the other side of the political spectrum there emerged two major left-wing guerrilla organizations espousing revolutionary Islamic ideology:

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 123–124.

⁶⁹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 105.

Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) and the Marxist Fadaian. The MKO, established in 1965, was a revolutionary Muslim organization that reinterpreted Shi'a Islam through the lens of Marxism. The Organization of People's Fadaian Guerrillas (OPFG), formed in 1971, was a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary organization independent of the Soviet Union and Communist China. The militant ideology of both organisations deemed armed struggle against the state as both tactically and strategically necessary. It was argued that armed struggle could mobilize the people by making the regime vulnerable in the eyes of the public, paving the way for a popular revolution. This leftist ideology was attractive to some segments of university students, intellectuals, and workers. In addition to the left-wing guerrilla organizations, the militant clergy and their *bazaari* allies formed right-wing religious guerrilla organizations. These included the Coalition of Islamic Associations (Hey'at ha ye Mo'talefe-ye Islami), which maintained links to the guerrilla group Devotees of Islam (Fedaiyan-e Islam), and forged informal ties with Ayatollah Khomeini. Formed in 1963, the Fedaiyan-e Islam was behind the assassination of the Shah's Prime Minister Hasan-Ali Mansour in 1965.⁷⁰

Given the diversity of political forces in pre-revolutionary Iran, it is misleading to suggest that there was an essentialist, monolithic, whole-sale, and unified concept of Islam as politics. The revolutionary movement was made of a populist coalition of left, right, religious, and secular trends as well as liberal and socialist groups. Out of this situation emerged a set of ideas and ideologies that mobilized the people. The question, however, remains: Why did Khomeinism come to dominate the revolution in 1978–1979?

THE DOMINATION OF KHOMEINISM

Radicalism and populist-Islamism contributed to the rise and popularity of Khomeinism. Khomeinism was a revolutionary discourse, and radicalism was the hegemonic political culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The formation of an autocratic state in post-1953 Iran had obstructed all peaceful paths to democracy, successfully destroying the weak democratic and secular political institutions in Iran. Moreover, the failure of the Shah's autocratic modernization and the decline of secular (nationalist and leftist) groups in the late 1960s contributed to the rise of an alternative Islamic discourse.

⁷⁰ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, p. 84.

Khomeini was certainly a radical and revolutionary cleric in the late 1970s, but he was not always a revolutionary Ayatollah. Like most clerics, Ayatollah Khomeini – in particular, before 1963 – believed in the traditional quietism of Shi'i Islam. Neither the 1963 uprising nor the early years of exile turned Khomeini into a radical and revolutionary thinker. He was a constitutionalist, but in the 1970s emerged as a radical leader of the opposition because his discourse was increasingly fraught with modernist concepts that were politically relevant to the revolutionary conditions that existed in Iran.

Moreover, Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in incorporating a set of modern ideas and new cultural idioms that were foreign to traditional Islam. He adopted ideas developed by progressive Muslim thinkers and even secular intellectuals that went beyond the traditional purview of the clerical orthodoxy in Iran. As discussed previously, the ideas of lay intellectuals such as Jalal al-Ahmad, whose pamphlet "Gharbzadegi" called for a return to Islamic roots, and Ali Shariati, whose attractive modern idioms appealed to the urban middle class influenced Ayatollah Khomeini's transition from a traditional Ayatollah to a revolutionary one whose ideas appealed to a wider section of the Iranian populace. Undoubtedly, on the eve of the revolution, the young urban middle class, intellectuals, and students considered Ayatollah Khomeini a charismatic leader who would realise the aims of the revolution – particularly egalitarianism and social justice.⁷¹

As I have argued so far, during the 1960s and 1970s political culture in Iran became increasingly radicalized. Under the Shah's reign of terror and in the absence of any peaceful constitutional channels to reform the regime, the political arena was ripe for revolution. This radicalism was partly shaped by discourses emphasizing nationalism and anti-imperialism, and populist ideas emphasizing social justice. There was also the influence of Third Worldism: the doctrine of popular Third World revolutionary movements that were so central to many revolutionary struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. Khomeinism as a political ideology reflected all of these trends of Iranian radicalism, and successfully merged them into a hegemonic ideology powerful enough to spearhead a broad revolutionary movement.

The success of Khomeinism overshadowed progressive ideas introduced by modern intellectuals, and requires some clarification. Khomeinism was a mixture of ideas and a marriage of opposites, as Ayatollah Khomeini

⁷¹ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 534.

and his close circle of clerics hired (if not hijacked) modern progressive idioms. They utilized political concepts or intellectual expressions introduced by both the secular intelligentsia and progressive Muslim intellectuals – and particularly those of Ali Shariati – incorporating them into a hybrid discourse permeated by Third Worldist themes, populism, radicalism, and Islamism.

Ali Shariati died from a massive heart attack in London in June 1977, just prior to the revolution. Amidst the revolutionary upheaval and in his absence, the authentic meaning of his ideas, which were based on a radical deconstruction of Islamic thought, were lost. Henceforth, Shariati's words and idioms were applied outside of their original intellectual and political context. As a result, his discourse was manipulated to fit the politics of the day, partly because of its partial and improper use within the hegemonic discourse of Khomeinism. On the eve of the revolution, Shariati's discourse – like other non-clerical discourses – was not institutionalised; nor was it carried forward by a single charismatic leader. Because Shariati had opposed the political (autocratic) and religious (conservative) establishments, he was attacked from both sides. Consequently, he did not establish a political organization of his own, nor did he use the traditional institutions controlled by the clergy. Thus, his death led to confusion and misrepresentation of his ideology.

THE TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

"Due to the weakness of civil society under sultanism," Chehabi and Linz argue, "religious organizations and in the end organized religion become a major locus of oppositional activity as they provide support, resources, and leadership."⁷² Contrary to conventional wisdom, the traditional clerical institutions experienced growth and influence under the Shah's regime. The regime suppressed modern opposition with far more consistency than traditional groups, who benefited from the nationwide network of mosques, theological seminaries, religious shrines, charitable endowments, and religious lecture halls. The clergy in particular could perform a variety of ceremonial, judicial, and social-welfare functions and remained able to publish a number of religious journals. In short, the resources and opportunities available to the *ulama* were denied others in

⁷² H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, "A Theory of Sultanism 2: Genesis and Demise of Sultanistic Regimes" in Chehabi and Linz (eds.) (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), *Sultanistic Regimes*, p. 42.

the opposition.⁷³ The Cold War and the legacy of the 1953 coup pushed the Shah's regime into even more ruthless suppression of the progressive left and the liberal opposition. Given "the relative sanctuary of the mosque," the Khomeinists increasingly succeeded in filling the institutional gap because they were in a position to maintain their institutional independence because of their own economic and political resources.⁷⁴ Historically, the institutions of the clergy possessed a significant degree of autonomy from the state. They controlled religious endowment institutions (*awqaf*) in schools, mosques, shrines, and hospitals. The clerical establishment also maintained direct control over religious taxes such as one-fifth of the agricultural and commercial profits (*khums*), taxes on various categories of wealth (*zakat*), and taxes on voluntary charitable payments (*sadaqah*).

Why did the traditional establishment cooperate with Khomeini, whose political discourse broke the long history of quietism by challenging the official policy of the Shi'i establishment? Why did the quietist clerical institutions provide Ayatollah Khomeini with organizational resources? Why did they eventually join the revolution? There are two ways to address these questions. First, the Shah's arrogant neo-sultanistic approach eventually turned the clerical establishment into an active opposition. The creation of the Literacy Corps was regarded as a challenge to the traditional role of the clergy in the educational system,⁷⁵ and the Shah cancelled monthly payments to clerical students after the White Revolution in the 1960s. In 1967, the *majlis* passed the Family Protection Law, which undermined both the *shariah* and social clout of the clerical institutions.⁷⁶ In the mid-1970s, the regime closed down some religious institutions and lecture halls – namely the Faiziyeh seminary in Qom, the Hedayat mosque, and Hosseinieh Ershad in Tehran.⁷⁷

⁷³ Valentine Moghadam, "Populist Revolution and the Islamic State in Iran" in Terry Boswell (ed.) *Revolution in the World System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 153.

⁷⁴ In the early 1970s, Ali Shariati and a few other Muslim intellectuals held their lectures in the Hosseinieh Ershad – a modern Islamic institution in Northern Tehran where most of the audience were university students. However, this was a short-lived opportunity because the regime closed the institute in the 1970s, and Shariati was imprisoned and banned for life from giving public lectures in the last four years of his life (1973–1977).

⁷⁵ Shahroukh Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), p. 98.

⁷⁶ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 444.

⁷⁷ Misagh Parsa, *The Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 196.

The regime dissolved all university-based religious student associations, forbade some religious figures from delivering public lectures, and shut down a number of religious publishing centres.⁷⁸ At the same time, the Shah's regime – despite its harshness – was unable to control the nation's approximately 90,000 clerics or shut down all the mosques and religious institutions.⁷⁹ The relative economic and political autonomy of the clerical establishment helped the clergy as an institution to survive and serve Khomeini's revolutionary purpose.

Conversely, secular constitutionalists, progressive Muslims, liberals, and socialists experienced institutional decline in the 1960s and 1970s. The national bourgeoisie suffered from the state's autocratic structural transformation and integration into the world economy. In the post-coup era, the secular-constitutionalists lost their organizational power. The Shah's secret police and military apparatus destroyed practically all organized secular political groups such as the liberal National Front and the Marxist Tudeh Party. Similarly, the Islamic Mojahedin and Marxist Fadaian guerrilla organizations were demolished by the secret police. On the eve of the revolution, they held neither a large social base nor the sufficient resources for an effective and viable political organization. As a result, the Khomeinist factions filled the institutional gap among the opponents of the Shah's regime.

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

"In traditional societies," Max Weber writes, "charisma is the real revolutionary force."⁸⁰ For Weber, the test of charisma is the recognition of the leader by his followers.⁸¹ This recognition goes beyond the leader's personal character and qualifications, and relies on the social conditions within which charisma is "awakened and tested."⁸² In a society where religion had played a significant part in shaping public opinion, Khomeini's charisma was partly a product of his religious status. Khomeini was respected as a Grand Ayatollah, but he remained ineffective in leading socio-political changes because of his exile. The revolutionary conditions

⁷⁸ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 444.

⁷⁹ Foran, *Fragile Resistance, Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 337.

⁸⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. i (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), p. 245.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 249.

of the late 1970s, however, transformed him into a popular leader with a broad base amongst the revolutionary movements.

According to Max Weber, when spiritual “disenchantment” takes place in “moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political” – society needs “re-enchantment,” or an “otherworldly” experience.⁸³ As Durkheim observed, in such times the need for re-enchantment that is sometimes fulfilled by charismatic leadership is because of increasing “anomie” or moral/spiritual isolation brought about by the process of rapid modernization.⁸⁴ Similarly, Antonio Gramsci suggested that at a “certain point in their historical lives, social classes become detached from their traditional parties.”⁸⁵ At this point, “the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic ‘men of destiny.’”⁸⁶ History suggests that such charismatic men of destiny are by-products of a mass society. William Kornhauser added:

The phenomenon of mass society springs from a double crisis: on one level it is a crisis of alienation resulting from the rapid introduction of new cultural symbols for which the population is unprepared; on another it ensues from conditions of institutional fragmentation making “elites ... readily accessible to ... non-elites and non-elites ... readily available for mobilization by elites.”⁸⁷

The crisis of mass society in pre-revolutionary Iran hence compelled the new middle class to accept and appreciate Khomeini’s charismatic leadership. “While not as profound as that which swept Germany during the forties,” Daniel Brumberg stated in this regard, “Iran’s crisis was sufficiently disruptive to impel nearly all urban social groups to mobilize in their quest for charismatic experience and leadership.”⁸⁸

Both structural and symbolic forces set the stage for the successful experience of Khomeini’s charisma. The Shah’s cultural policy of pre-Islamic nationalism and unequal relations with the West contributed to

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 1111–1112.

⁸⁴ Kenneth Thompson (ed.), *Readings from Emile Durkheim* (Chichester: Ellis Harwood, 1985), p. 129.

⁸⁵ Antonio Gramsci in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds., trans.) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 210, quoted in Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 25.

⁸⁶ See Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, pp. 25–26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 90; Brumberg’s argument is taken from William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 39.

⁸⁸ Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, p. 90.

the deepening sense of Gharbzadegi.⁸⁹ The Shah had undermined all secular institutions and pushed all “urban groups – intellectuals, *bazaaris*, students, and the lower middleclass *mostaz’afin* – to seek refuge in mass arenas such as the religious seminaries, universities, mosques, and ultimately the *streets themselves*.”⁹⁰ Khomeini emerged armed with Shi’i cultural symbols and clerical institutions in order to lead this mass movement. A combination of the sudden and mysterious death of his son Mostafa in October 1977; the publication of an insulting article published in *Ettela’at* daily newspaper that described Khomeini as a British agent and mad Indian poet; the Jaleh Square demonstration on September 9, 1978; and the death of protesters all fuelled the revolutionary movement, and placed Khomeini in a position to lead the people.

Social crisis, Max Weber indicates, creates a non-rational need for charismatic experiences and revolutionary change. Ayatollah Khomeini’s charisma was both cultural and political in character. His religious authority allowed his followers to transform the nature of a political movement into a test of the religious emotion of the people in confronting the Shah’s regime. This sentiment was encapsulated in chants such as “History witnessed three idol-breakers: Abraham Khalilollah, Mohammad Rasoulollah, and Khomeini Ruhollah,” which placed Khomeini on an equal footing with the prophets Abraham and Mohammad.⁹¹ Such popular sentiments allowed Ayatollah Khomeini to assemble a wide spectrum of social forces behind him. He was an unusually unorthodox Ayatollah, and a personification of many syntheses and contradictions. To the people he represented, he appeared traditional. To the young and idealistic Iranian intelligentsia, he represented unorthodoxy and resistance. In this way, his political message reached members of all social classes.

CONCLUSION

Ayatollah Khomeini was himself both synthesizer and synthesis. His life was full of contradictions, and his thinking and ideology evolved over five distinct stages across almost half a century. Young Khomeini contested monarchic rule but did not challenge the institution of monarchy: he remained a constitutionalist. His first public statement came in

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

⁹¹ See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 104.

a book published in 1943/1944. The book, entitled *Kashf-e Asrar* (*The Discovery of Secrets*), was essentially a detailed and systematic critique of an anti-religious tract. In *Kashf-e Asrar*, Khomeini argued that the clergy should provide legal and moral guidance and not become politically active. In return, the clergy expected respect for the *shariah* and clerical establishment. Khomeini's real entry into politics came in 1962–1963, after the inauguration of the Shah's reforms known as the White Revolution. Despite the events of 1963, Khomeini's view as a constitutionalist remained unchanged until the 1970s. The revolutionary conditions in Iran transformed Khomeini from a quietest constitutionalist cleric into a revolutionary Ayatollah. He became at the same time a consequence and an engineer of Iran's revolutionary conditions.

For centuries, the clerical establishment including the young Khomeini lived under monarchy. Khomeini the revolutionary, however, broke this tradition. The monarchy, he argued, was a legacy of polytheism (*shirk*).⁹² For a true Muslim – who believes in monotheism (*tawhid*) and subordinates to God alone – this was unacceptable. To Khomeini the revolutionary, political resistance against all idolatry (*taqut*), either in the form of a domestic despot such as the Shah or an arrogant foreign power (*estekbar*), became a religious obligation. More importantly, his populist Third World revolutionary discourse appealed to many social forces in the late 1970s. As Abrahamian indicates:

He sprinkled his declarations with radical sound bites that were later adopted as revolutionary street slogans:

Islam belongs to the oppressed (*mostazafin*), not to the oppressors (*mostakberin*).

Islam represents the slum-dwellers (*zaghehmeshin*), not the palace-dwellers (*kakhmeshin*).

Islam is not the opiate of the masses.

The poor die for the revolution, the rich plot against the revolution.

The oppressed (*mostazafin*) of the world, unite.

[...]

The duty of the clergy is to liberate the poor from the clutches of the rich.⁹³

⁹² Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, *Ettela'at*, December 2, 1985, quoted in Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, p. 147.

⁹³ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, p. 148.

Wilayat al-Faqih and the Meaning of Islamic Government

Amr GE Sabet

INTRODUCTION

The triumph of the Islamic revolution of Iran in February 1979 surprised many observers, and continues to baffle others today. The introduction into contemporary politics of a religious dimension challenged contemporary understandings of the human condition in ways that have called into question much of the basic premises of modern secularism. The revolution tended to be perceived largely in light of the preconceptions and predispositions of the observer rather than as something original and unique – sui generis. Many failed to see the revolution as a phenomenon that is to be understood and comprehended from within its own dynamics and on its own terms, rather than in terms of mere Western social science categories (insightful as they may be). Consequently, varied designations were and continue to be attributed to the Iranian state; ranging from it being a form of “anachronistic theocracy” to being pejoratively referred to as the “rule of the *mullahs*” or a “religious dictatorship”.

Such attitudes oversimplify highly complex issues and reflect an ideological prejudice and/or lack of comprehension. The deep impact that this revolutionary phenomenon had and continues to have on the Muslim community, both Sunni and Shi'i, renders it a profound social, political as well as religious innovation that combines the twin elements of religious reasoning (*ijtihad*) and renewal (*tajdid*). Both elements were infused with the praxis dimension, beyond mere theoretical constructs, through the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the person of *al-Faqih* represented by Grand Ayatollah Khomeini.