

# The Iranian Revolution and Its Democratic Limits: Why the 1979 Iranian Revolution Did Not Produce Democracy

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**Abstract:** This paper examines why the 1979 Iranian Revolution failed to produce a democratic regime. Drawing on a historical analysis of the revolution and the demands of different social groups, it argues that the movement was not a unified struggle for democracy but a fragile coalition of actors with divergent interests. This lack of cohesion enabled the consolidation of clerical power after the fall of the monarchy. Using Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens' theory of democratization, the paper further shows that structural constraints—particularly a weak working class and a highly autonomous state—made democratic outcomes unlikely. The Iranian case thus illustrates how both coalition fragmentation and structural conditions can undermine democratic transitions.

**Keywords:** Iranian Revolution; democratization; coalitions; state autonomy; working class; theocracy

## 1. Introduction

Iranian revolution initially seemed to be an overthrow of the monarchy which aims to create a decentralized “Islamic Republic” that advocates freedom of speech and human rights. However, it ultimately developed into a theocratic government that was more authoritarian than many had expected. Today, many observers would argue that Iran continues to face serious economic, political, and religious tensions. So what happened in this revolution, and why did it move away from some of its earlier aspirations? In this paper, I'll introduce how the Iranian revolution happened and the causes of it including the different demands from different collectives that participated in it, discuss why the revolution did not produce the outcome many participants had hoped for, and whether or not it could be evidence for Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens' theory of democratization.

Three factors are often associated with third-world revolutions like the one that happened in Iran in 1979, namely, the politicization of market relation, a hyperactive non-autonomous state, and politicization of class conflict [1]. In the following section, I'll briefly introduce the timeline of the revolution and why these events led to the final outbreak in February 1979.

The first major event that led to the revolution was the 1953 Iranian coup [2]. Before 1953, even though Iran had already had some economic issues about its oil, the country appeared to be moving in a relatively promising political direction with the help of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. Mosaddegh released a lot of policies that contributed to deconcentrating the power of the state and diminishing inequality but also earned himself some enemies during the process. For example, he dissolved the Senate which was formed by the Shah, called for land reform and better treatment of the peasantry given his aristocratic background, and retired 130 army officers including 15 generals because they were too political, which made him unappealing to the Shah,

landlords and some clergy [3]. His defense of women's rights also antagonized conservative members of the clergy. However, this internal opposition within Iran was still not enough to lead to a successful coup because Mosaddegh still appears to have enjoyed broad support in Iran even though he was portrayed as being homosexual and even a Communist by western media. This can be told by the fact that there was a celebration by Iranian citizens after the first failed coup against Mosaddegh. However, the second try of the coup succeeded with more external force and ended up with the overthrow of Prime Minister Mosaddegh. Given his popularity, it was not surprising to see that there were uprisings by students and bazaaris against the newly formed government ruled by the Shah as the monarch. However, these uprisings were repressed, often violently, and the CIA even helped the Shah to form SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, to stabilize his ruling [4]. From then on, Mosaddegh's democratic project was interrupted, and a more centralized government emerged with support from powerful landlords and members of the clergy. People's resentment against the government's repression also became a seed for later revolutions.

After the coup, Americans realized that many Iranians no longer viewed them favorably and increasingly saw them less as supporters of democracy than as outside interveners. However, given the importance of Iran which comes from its distance from the Soviet Union and its oil, Americans still thought it would be necessary to do something to avoid a communist revolution in Iran. As a result, they carried out a land reform that aimed to gain popularity among peasants and support from Iranians. This action could also weaken the landlords and clergy who were American's enemies in Iran. Under the pressure from the States, the Shah agreed to have land reform. However, with the growing popularity of newly assigned Prime Minister Amini, the Shah gradually became suspicious of the relationship between Amini and the National Front, and decided to take over and carry out the reform by himself, and got more power and control over everything than anyone in the country. Although peasants were quite happy about the reform, clergies were against some policies like women's rights. However, this resentment wasn't shared by all people so there were no major uprising until June 1963, when Khomeini stood out and protested against the law of capitulation, which was about treatment toward foreigners who commit crimes in Iran and seemed to be unfair to most Iranians [5]. This uprising ended violently in repression carried out by armed forces and Khomeini was arrested. However, he was only exiled instead of executed since he was recommended as the highest ayatollah. After the repression, the Shah began to rule dictatorially by appointing the Prime Minister, controlling economics, media, and armed forces, and making all important decisions personally. What's worse, the new American President Nixon, who was helped by the Shah and is a friend of him, does not denounce his dictatorship or carry out any other attempt in promoting democracy in Iran. The Shah's power had become more concentrated than before.

Iran then experienced a development that initially appeared beneficial: Iran's oil revenues quadrupled. This brought a huge amount of wealth to Iran and greatly promoted its industrialization process. The Shah built a lot of government-owned hospitals, airports, dams, and so on to increase his control over the country. However, Iran wasn't prepared for such a huge amount of income. Firstly, the production of a third-world country like Iran could not satisfy the market, and great inflation appeared. Everything became more expensive to citizens at once. Secondly, there was a severe problem of corruption within the government of Iran. A substantial portion of the income used internally by the Shah reportedly went to the Shah's relatives and associates. This made the lives of normal citizens harder because everything became more expensive while their income didn't change greatly. To earn a living, merchants began to sell their goods at a higher price, which became a vicious cycle. As a result, the government intervened and released several policies like price control to stabilize the market and appease the citizens. These policies placed significant pressure on merchants and made them participants in later revolutions. Besides, they also made the economic problem a political problem because of the intervention of the government.

By this point, Iran appeared to meet many of the conditions for a third-world country revolution [6]. Firstly, there was a high level of intervention by the government on economic issues. A good example is the price control policy mentioned above. Second, the State has highly concentrated power. The Shah exercised control over most major institutions in the country and the State became a hyperactive one. Thirdly, there was politicization of class conflict: the secret police SAVAK could arrest and repress any voice that dare to speak

against the Shah publicly or privately. With these conditions in place and growing resentment toward the government, the likelihood of revolution increased significantly.

## 2. Collectives and Their Demands during 1979 Revolution

It was widely believed that the 1979 revolution was a cohesive movement driven by the same ideology that aimed to overthrow the monarchy and establish an Islamic republic [7]. However, if that was the case, the 1979 revolution would have happened much earlier when Iranians started mobilization for political freedom equality, and social justice in the 1950s. However, student movements then were unsupported and failed, which suggests that different collectives had different demands and that the revolution was more complex than a cohesive movement. In the following section, I'll discuss different collectives' slogans and demands and their roles in the revolution.

Firstly, intellectuals and students were interested in politics during their revolution. They were looking for "precepts of the institution, freedom of speech, and free elections" [7]. Students had turned universities into centers of political opposition and invited leftist intellectuals to speak on campus. Standing in the forefront of the revolution, their importance in the political arena was known well by the government. As a result, many universities were closed and violent repression was carried out against student uprisings. Like students, intellectuals in Iran also advocated some sort of socialism or liberal nationalism. This can be told by the background of participants of the "poetry nights": a majority of them were secular socialists [2].

Secondly, bazaaris were also very active in the political arena. One thing that needs to be noticed here is that even though these are all religious people, their religious orientation didn't equal to their political ideology, which means that their mobilization was out of their own will of liberal nationalism instead of under the authority of the clergy. For example, their mobilization in the second half of the 1970s was in response to the economical and political changes including the policy of price control and anti-profiteering [8]. Even though bazaaris' statements during the revolution were primarily political, including protests against the government's regimes and its dependence on foreign aids, there is limited evidence that these bazaaris supported any program of Islamization of laws or a theoretical Islamic republic. Bazaaris played an important role in providing support for clergy and striking workers in later revolutions, but that was because they were on the same side against the government instead of a shared reason or ideology.

Workers and white-collar employees only joined the stage of revolution in the final phase because of their initial non-political demands, but they played an important role because oil workers were central to a key sector of the economy [9]. As a result, their strikes could therefore have a significant impact on the state. The demands of workers and white-collar employees were initially economical even though there were some political mobilizations, for example, the one that happened in 1978 because Sharif-Emami offered nothing good to the workers. After the oil revenue quadrupled and great inflation occurred, the living standard of workers and white-collar employees declined substantially. As a result, their strikes were out of economical concerns, and were hoping for higher wages, medical insurance, and loans. Even though the government offered some responses to these demands, these responses were not fully satisfactory to these strikers. As their doubt on the concession of the state accumulated, their strikes gradually involved some political reasons, including a condemnation of the government's repression and the martial law, asking for more freedom, and a dissolution of government unions. These political demands were different from those of the students' whose demands were a complete revolution. Being similar to bazaaris, workers supported Khomeini not for his religious opinions but simply because of his opposition to the government.

Fourthly, the clerics, similar to bazaaris and workers, didn't join mobilization in the early phase either, which was because of both their apolitical nature and the lack of repression on Mosques from the government. Their economic demands weren't as great as those of workers either. But that doesn't mean the religious part of the country didn't contribute to the revolution. In fact, as the only autonomous institutions in the country before 1979, Mosques offered a safe place for mobilizations for collective action [10]. In the later part of the revolution, a minority of clergies who were supporters of ayatollah Khomeini played an important role in safely recruiting ideologically unaffiliated volunteers for marshals for revolutions.

In a word, different collectives that participated in the 1979 revolution were asking for different things initially, but they all more or less politicized and finally resulted in a revolution that overthrew the monarchy.

### **3. Why the Revolution Did Not Lead to Democracy**

After the revolution, instead of the Islamic republic that many participants associated with political freedom, economic equality, and human rights, a theocratic government was established. Khomeini claimed that the democratic government that people were fighting for was based on the rule of humans who could fall into error, and was thus unacceptable because it had a western dimension. Rather than prioritizing human rights and freedom, the new rulers relied on ideological mobilization, political control, and repression to consolidate support and suppress opposition. The outcome of the revolution differed greatly from its initial aim. In this sense, many of the revolution's earlier aspirations were not realized.

A major reason why the revolution did not lead to democracy was the variation in different collectives' demands, or in other words, the lack of a strong coalition. With such difference, it would be hard for these collectives to look for their allies during the revolution, and they could end up searching for allies primarily on the basis of short-term political actions rather than shared motivations. This can be supported by the fact that the major slogan of the revolution was "anti-despotic" in the first days of the revolution but became "Independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic" later on [6]. Many people who were shouting slogans about the Islamic Republic may not have had a clear idea of what such a republic might look like, and saw no conflict between Islamic ideology and human rights or democracy [11]. Ayatollah Khomeini's deceptive move of not mentioning democracy but saying the intellectuals would be the ones that will lead the newly formed Republic also contributed to developing a temporary and fragile union of different collectives during the revolution. This fragility of this coalition resulted in a quick collapse soon after the monarchy was overthrown. People soon found out that Khomeini, their leader during the revolution, offered a regime that could not satisfy their demands. By then, however, the balance of power had already shifted. Various forms of repression were carried out by the clerical rulers to maintain theocracy.

Contingent events also contributed to the emergence of theocracy after the revolution. Soon after the revolution, a provisional government led by Bazargan was formed. This new government had some ideological division with the militant clergy. However, the hostage crisis that began in 1979 weakened the provisional government and helped Khomeini marginalize some of his revolutionary allies while consolidating a theocratic constitution [12]. Besides, the Iran-Iraq war provided Iran with external enemies that intensified the nationalism inside the country to secure the new theocratic government's power [13]. These external conflicts helped Khomeini and his associates deflect domestic criticism and redirect attention away from internal problems. Besides, these external conflicts also provided the theocratic government with justifications for eliminating its domestic opponents. If the theocratic government wanted to silence any opposing voice, they could arrest such people and portray them as secret agents sent by the United States or Iraq. Overall, these external conflicts emerged at a moment that helped the newly formed theocratic government survive its most unstable period.

### **4. Iran and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens' Theory of Democratization**

Even though contingent factors—such as Khomeini's commitment to a theocratic government and the timing of external conflicts—played some role in the Iranian revolution, according to Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens' theory of democratization, the Iranian revolution faced serious structural obstacles.

Firstly, the working class in Iran was too weak. According to Rueschemeyer, a strong working class is the most important force that would fight for suffrage during democratization [14]. One objection to this claim is that before the 1979 revolution, the quadruple of the oil revenue brought a huge amount of wealth to Iran, and this capitalist development should have done well for democratization according to Rueschemeyer's theory. Such an objection overlooks that capitalist development is good for democracy only if it strengthens the urban working class and weakens large landowners. However, in Iran, such capitalist development may have played the opposite role. The wealth that was gained from the oil flew into upper governors' pockets because of severe corruption and the income of the urban workers didn't improve substantially. The wealth strengthened the

power of the upper class, and the resulting inequality was harmful for democratization. Besides, potential allies of the working class were too weak as well. Even though land reform was carried out during the White Revolution and the power of landlords was greatly diminished, it was the bureaucrats who mostly benefited from it. Even though the merchants and entrepreneurs gained a share of benefits, they were still not a major block in the parliament to push for anything substantial [7].

Secondly, the state was highly autonomous in ways unfavorable to democracy. Rueschmeyer suggests that a state apparatus that enjoys considerable autonomy vis-a-vis the mass of the population—the petty bourgeoisie, small farmers as well as the working class—is unlikely to be a factor favorable to democratization [1]. The Shah's rule was a strong example of such autonomy [15]. With the help of the upper ruling class that was assigned by him, the Shah could exercise control over most of the country except the mosques and was relatively insulated from pressure from the lower classes. Besides, according to Rueschmeyer, the pre-democratic pacts of domination, especially those that involved a landlord class that relied on labor repressive agriculture as Iran did, have to break up before democratization has a serious chance. However, in Iran, the final overthrow of the monarchy was unexpected and the rule of the Shah didn't have any sense of breaking up. There were some uprisings and strikes, but none of them fundamentally weakened the Shah's power before the final revolutionary crisis.

Thirdly, the external force also contributed to the final theocratic government. One example of it is Iran's dependence on the world economy. After the oil revenues quadrupled and the inflation began, to resist the financial difficulties, the Shah tried to ask OPEC to reduce the production and increase the price of oil, but was refused and was given a reason that claimed that the world economy was unhealthy and any change in oil price might have a significant outcome. Another example of the external force would be the Iran-Iraq war after the 1979 revolution. This war strengthened the position of the military and coercive forces within the state, which was unfavorable for democracy either [1].

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