

# A revolution between two dictatorships

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The last mass revolution of the twentieth century took place in Iran against Pahlavi's regime in 1979. Iran has an important position in the political balance of the Middle East because of its location in the region, rich oil resources and being one of the most important centers of Shia Islam. Naturally, the overthrowing of the Pahlavi dictatorship shook the world at that time. This dictatorship was established and rose with the direct support of the imperialist powers. The revolution destroyed the unshakable fortress of imperialism in the Middle East and broke down the imperialism-designed-order in the region.

The 1979 Revolution, on the other hand, is the story of a generation that followed hope like *The Little Black Fish*.<sup>1</sup> This generation was an important part of the revolution that spread a hope of establishing a very long awaited democratic society. However, from the first days of this new era, a new dictatorship began to rise. Those who established this dictatorship came out from inside the revolution and started their way by eliminating other revolutionaries, those who were hoping to establish a free democratic society. In a short time, a religious dictatorship replaced the Pahlavi dictatorship. The Islamist fundamentalists restored the state

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<sup>1</sup> *The Little Black Fish* is a book written by Samad Behrangi (1939-1967). He was a school teacher with Marxist ideas.

of fear and oppression again. Little black fishes were captured by another hunter when they reached the sea. This time they didn't use their swords or they drew it very late. In a decade of brutal massacres, the religious dictatorship purged the revolutionaries from Iran's political arena.

The 1979 Revolution is both a tremendous success and a great disappointment. The successful part of it was quickly depleted, so the revolution is engraved as a failure on people's minds. This failure had very destructive results in Iranian society. For many Iranians, the word revolution only reminds the Islamic revolution, reactionism, death, torture, and oppression. Nevertheless, the 1979 Revolution was not an Islamic revolution. It was called the Islamic revolution after the rise of religious dictatorship. The historians of the Islamic Republic and other bourgeois historians usually try to reflect it as an outcome of the Islamic revival to hide the massive social and economic motivations behind it. This revolution was a result of a spontaneous mass movement. The driving force of the revolution was not Islamic revival or Shiite self-awareness. It was a product of a revolt, coming from a common will that suffered from deep social inequalities. Some mullahs (clerics) played a role in the emergence of the revolts; however, Khomeini, the so-called leader of the revolution, had no absolute dominance over the revolutionary movement until the last months of the mass demonstrations.

The 1979 Revolution reached a triumph at the end of an intense period of mass demonstrations that continued for a year, but the foundations of this victory were laid many years ago. In order to understand this revolution, which broke down a seemingly unshakable dictatorship, it is necessary to start a long journey like the people who made it. Observing how the Pahlavi dictatorship was born and how Iran's society changed along with it reveals the depth of the revolutionary movement, which turned into flames from sparks within a year.

### **The 1953 Coup: the rise of the Pahlavi dictatorship**

Iran saluted the twentieth century with a revolution widely known as the Constitution Revolution. However, the rise of Reza Pahlavi with a British Empire-directed coup ended the Iranians' dream of constructing a democratic constitutional government. Reza Pahlavi established the Pahlavi Dynasty and gradually gained complete control over all organs of the government, until the Allies occupied Iran in 1941. The occupation put an end to his 16 year-old reign, which had caused widespread discontent among different social classes. Reza Pahlavi never gained serious social support although he led the reforms to build a modern bureaucracy, army and judiciary in Iran. The Allies made the young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Reza Pahlavi's son) the new king after sending Reza Pahlavi to exile. Suddenly, the country became the domain of different social conflicts, due to a power vacuum after years of oppression. These conflicts resulted in deep political changes inside the society.

M. R. Pahlavi was faced with different opposition groups which were planted during his father's reign. The most organized opposition force was the Tudeh Party of Iran. This party was established right after the occupation with a public call against the dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> The party was calling itself a working class organization although it was mainly organized among well-educated employed in state-owned enterprises. The second opposition force was the liberal National Front. They also were targeting to organize people with a similar social background that the Tudeh Party was. The third most influential group was the Islamic movement, supported by the petty and middle bourgeoisie (with their main representative the Bazaar). The last group was composed of different ethnic movements, mainly organized in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces.

The army took the control in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan after suppressing two local democrat parties, soon after the end of the World War II. However, the government struggled to find a balance for a relatively long time. This period was an era of conflict among M. R. Pahlavi, the national assembly, government, the foreign consuls, and the public-support-relying opposition forces. And the oil was in the middle of all conflicts.

After the discovery of oil in Iran, foreign powers, especially the British imperialism, took advantage of the weakness of the state and exploited Iran's oil. They usually forced governments to accept concessions that allowed foreign companies to control the oil extraction. By the end of the first Pahlavi's dictatorship the struggle for the nationalization of oil started. The movement was led by Mohammad Mosaddegh, a member of parliament from the National Front. With a large public support, the legislation of the nationalization of oil was passed in 1951. The National Front emerged as a powerful political movement after this achievement. Despite its initial critics toward the National Front, after the nationalization of oil the Tudeh Party was on the streets and played an important role to enact the law. The party organized strikes in the oil-rich area of Khuzestan and carried out large solidarity demonstrations in Tehran and other big cities. Some of these demonstrations ended up with a brutal police attack. A big political crisis emerged in the country, and despite changes, governments were unable to control the situation. The only way out for M. R. Pahlavi was to appoint Mosaddegh as the prime minister.

It was obvious that this period was not going to end peacefully. There was a political war between the public-backed government on one side, and the Pahlavi along with big landlords on the other side. Whenever it was needed, the National Front was calling people to strikes and demonstrations through the Tudeh Party. The government also benefited from conservatives' support for a short time. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 281.

Bazaar, the leading representative of the conservatives participated in the strikes by closing shops.

The National Front, relying on its huge public support, started some big reforms. Most of the economic and political power owned by Pahlavi family was transferred to the government and the army's budget was lowered. Land reform and women's suffrage came accordingly. Dissatisfied with the National Front's reforms and scared from the Tudeh Party's public power, the army, Pahlavi, and the British and the US imperialism all united on a coup plan.<sup>3</sup>

The four allies' first coup attempt was exposed by Tudeh's wide network inside the army. Tudeh organized protests and invited people to join the demonstrations. Pahlavi escaped to Baghdad and the National Front assembled a committee to determine the fate of the royal reign. The US ambassador visited Mosaddegh and promised to support the government if he controls the streets. Mosaddegh called people to retreat to their homes. As soon as people left the streets the military coup took place.<sup>4</sup> The Tudeh Party who accepted Mosaddegh's call for evacuating the streets passively watched the military coup.

The coup seemed to be carried out against Mosaddegh and the National Front, but it was rather against the Tudeh Party. Only one member of the National Front was sentenced to be executed and others received prison sentences, including Mosaddegh, while the Tudeh Party became a subject of a violent attack. It was obvious that the military coup targeted Tudeh in order to erase it from Iran's political arena. About 40 senior members of the party were executed within five years after the coup. Some of its members were killed under torture, and more than 3000 were sentenced to long term jail times.<sup>5</sup> The military network of the party was discovered and the army was cleaned from Tudeh members. Pahlavi, didn't allow any organized opposition inside and could now reign like his father did by establishing a dictatorship. The 1953 military coup could have been a turning point in the history of modern Iran. The people's organized struggle for a democratic society could have toppled the Pahlavi reign but its failure provided a ground for a dark dictatorship.

After the coup, M. R. Pahlavi began to reinforce his power. He received a large amount of financial help from the US to grant a new life to the economy in crisis. Pahlavi also benefited from the oil nationalization. He signed new oil deals. Iran's

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3 In the 60th anniversary of the 1953 Coup CIA published some confidential documents that show the intervention of the US and the British imperialism in the 1953 Coup. The documents are found in <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>. For more information, see Wilber Donald, *Regime Change in Iran*, Nottingham: Spokesman, 2006, p. 13.

4 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 280-281.

5 *ibid.*, p. 280.

oil revenue increased exponentially in two years.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he established a secret police organization, known as SAVAK (literally the Organization of National Intelligence and Security of the Nation), in order to monitor all political activities, increase pressure on the social opposition, prevent any attempt toward organizing the social forces and discover and eliminate the organized groups. In this period, Pahlavi had different approaches toward different social classes. He was harsh toward the working class and its intellectuals, while he was cautiously kind toward big landlords, the Bazaar-supported traditional conservatives (namely the mullahs) and the petty bourgeoisie. However, this political approach cost Pahlavi too much after declaring his so-called white revolution that raised a new and unexpected opposition in traditional conservatives.

### **The 1963 uprising and the reorganization of the opposition**

After establishing his power over opposition, Pahlavi felt a pressure from his financial supporters, i.e. the IMF and the US to undertake certain reforms, such as land reforms, nationalization of forests, privatization of the state-owned factories, and women's suffrage. Iran's agriculture-dependent economy was in a very poor and inefficient condition. Strengthened by the coup, the alliance of the palace and the big landowners was not allowing any sort of reforms in the economy. However, faced with a serious pressure from the IMF and the US, Pahlavi announced the above-mentioned reforms under the name of the White Revolution.

In June 1963, thousands of workers and unemployed people went into streets to demonstrate against Pahlavi's White Revolution. The protests were mainly organized by the Bazaar's representatives, and led by a new name in opposition, Ruhollah Khomeini. Unlike other mullahs, in his speeches Khomeini was not only referring to religious issues but also to some social issues such as constitutional rights, the freedom of the press and the independence of the universities. Khomeini was able to influence a wide range of groups from the conservative petty bourgeoisie to the middle class or even radical Islamic circles. The demonstrations turned into a big uprising and spread out to other major cities apart from Tehran. This uprising awakened the society from its deep depression after the coup. The security forces attacked the demonstrations. Hundreds of people were killed and Khomeini was arrested and later sent to a long-term exile while revealing himself as an important opposition figure. Pahlavi brutally suppressed another wave of opposition. However, these demonstrations established the importance and power of the Islamic movement.

Pahlavi's oppressive policies, which began after the coup and rose even

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6 F. Fesharaki, *Development of the Iranian Oil Industry: International and Domestic Aspects*, New York: Praeger, 1976, p. 133.

further with the events of 1963, led Iran to a deep dictatorship. A heavy political stagnation formed by the SAVAK and an oil-induced economic growth led Pahlavi to believe that there is no serious opposition around. Feeling confident in every way, M. R. Pahlavi performed his first coronation in 1967. However, under this steady state of oppression and political pressure, a new generation of social opposition grew up which had more radical approach with respect to those of the previous generation such as the National Front and the Tudeh Party.

The new opposition didn't expect a reform from the Pahlavi Dynasty. They firmly were against the dictatorship and determined to destroy it completely. This generation was developing in two different axes: a new leftist movement and of a radical Islamic movement. The main characteristic feature of the new opposition was its guerrilla tendency. Analyzing the 1953 coup, even the 1963 uprising, and the consequences of their failure, the new opposition raised severe criticism of the passive role of the former opposition during critical periods. For them the coup was a turning point from a reformist to a more radical line in the struggle to establish a democratic society in Iran. Thus, they were rejecting any sort of tolerance toward the Pahlavi Dynasty and imperialism. Moreover, the nationalist secularists and liberal Islamists were organizing under the umbrella of the National Front, and the reformist left was continuing its life with somehow more radical ideas than the past.

These opposition groups were not all in converging ideological lines, but all had a common goal, demolishing Pahlavi's dictatorship. All groups directly or indirectly contributed to the mass demonstrations which toppled Pahlavi's dictatorship in February 1979. However, in the very decisive few months before the revolution things were mainly controlled by the fundamentalist Islamists under the leadership of in-exile Khomeini. Khomeini came back to Iran to enjoy the power gifted to him by the revolutionaries.

Even though guerrilla organizations were still loved by people in 1978, when the popular uprisings emerged, the conservative Islamic movement took the upper hand in mobilizing the masses. Actually, the discourse of the guerrilla struggle had a hegemonic supremacy inside the opposition for years. However, they lost most of their senior members in the guerrilla war against dictatorship, and lots of their members were in Pahlavi's prisons. Because of organizational and political weakness of the guerrilla groups during the revolution, the fundamentalist Islamist movement and the conservative liberals established their hegemony over the masses. On the one hand, the brutal effort of Pahlavi's regime to destroy the progressive movements, on the other hand, the financial strengthening of the traditional conservatives facilitated this shift of hegemony.

## The 1979 Revolution and its foundations

The first protest against Pahlavi's oppressive policies sparked in late 1977, when intellectuals called for meetings in which they demanded the freedom of expression and an end to censorship. After a series of other protests the first mass demonstration started in January 1978. Thousands of young religious school students went into streets, enraged by what they considered to be slanderous remarks made against Khomeini in a national newspaper. They were followed by thousands more youth mostly unemployed who began protesting the regime's excesses. Security forces attacked the protests killing many people. The police violence fueled the demonstrations. Growing in size and revolutionary fervor, even in the face of lethal military repression, the unemployed, workers, artisans, merchants, students, and middle-ranking officials of Iran participated in widespread demonstrations against Pahlavi's regime.

Until the Black Friday, 8 September 1978, in which around one hundred people were killed in the attack by security forces<sup>7</sup> Khomeini didn't have full control over demonstrations. However, after that day he took the initiative in his hands. He gradually became the leader of the mass protests whereas he was living in exile in Iraq.

The day after the Black Friday, workers from the Tehran Refinery began a strike, demanding a wage increase and the abolition of the martial law. This strike also received support from the refineries in other cities. The strikes in the oil industry spread out to other sectors. The industrial workers, miners and bank workers also joined the strikes. Black Friday's fortieth day commemoration was bloody again. Within two months, the country was almost paralyzed as a result of the widespread strikes. The workers were demanding the return of Khomeini, the liquidation of SAVAK, the abolition of the martial law and the end of the dictatorship. It was the end of the road for Pahlavi. Even the opposition leaders were unable to control the demonstrations and strikes. The guerrilla groups, especially revived by the release of political prisoners, began to relaunch the armed struggle. People, especially the youth from Tehran's poor neighborhoods, set up barricades in many parts of the city and went into war with the army forces. The army soldiers no longer wanted to oppose people. They even took their weapons and joined the popular demonstrations. Eventually, on 16 January 1979 Pahlavi left Iran. On February 1, Khomeini went back to Iran and ten days later on 11 February 1979 Pahlavi's regime was completely overthrown.

The revolution happened after an extraordinary series of mass urban demonstrations and strikes. A year of a country-wide unrest starting gradually and erupting drastically, attracting people from different social positions cannot

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<sup>7</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 515-516.

be a result of a sudden discontent, it should have its roots in the existing social relations, and it indeed had. The revolution was the product of the contradictions that emerged after the 1953 Coup. The deep military dictatorship of M. R. Pahlavi and the oil-based economic developments cut all sort of connection between the state and different components of the society. The only way out was to topple the old regime and establish a new one. Based on this information the foundations of the success of the 1979 Revolution can be summarized under four headings.

### **1) The unequal economic development**

In the 1960s, as a result of the economic reforms under the name of the White Revolution, Iran's society was rapidly industrialized. It experienced a transformation from an agriculture-dependent pre-capitalist economy to a capitalist one. These reforms were supported by the continuously increasing oil incomes. As a result, a relatively considerable number of industrial workers emerged. In addition, the institutions and organizations within the state structure such as education and healthcare expanded and a large number of public workers emerged. Private sector evolved and some big landowners were transformed into an industrial bourgeoisie. In spite of developments in modern industry, the traditional petty-bourgeoisie and the conservative Bazaar merchants remained important. The growing economy even revived the Bazaar, in which yet a large amount of national market was taking place. However, there was no sense of an economic planning in these reforms.

In the long term, industrialization largely destroyed agricultural production. The impoverished peasants had to emigrate to big cities, where there were not enough job opportunities for large masses. Unemployment increased and large slums emerged in big cities. The economic development was not uniformly distributed among different social classes. Thus, the distance between classes increased. Moreover, the state stopped many projects after the 1975 crisis. The inflation that was kept in low percentages for a long time increased drastically and made life difficult for the urban population. The crisis also affected the middle class and the conservative petty bourgeoisie, who were satisfied with the economic development. Everybody, especially those living in the cities, regardless of their social roots blamed the state and naturally Pahlavi for the difficult life conditions. Thus in 1978, when the revolutionary wave began, a widespread social discontent was reflected into streets. The industrial and public workers, the poor, and even the middle class, hand in hand fought against the dictatorship on the streets.

## **2) Political weakness of imperialist-backed dictatorship**

Pahlavi maintained his reign with the direct support and intervention of the US and the British imperialism in the form of a military coup in 1953. The coup drove the country into a dictatorship. Although the reflections of a strong dictatorship were prominent in every aspect of social life in Iran, in people's mind Pahlavi was a foreign power- and imperialism-dependent king. Furthermore, the political structure in Iran did not strengthen in the modern sense as the dictatorship grew deeper. Pahlavi was not a symbolic ruler like the constitutional monarchies in the West. He had all the state power in his hands and was responsible for everything alone. Moreover, due to the increasing revenue of the oil industry, the state income became completely dependent on the oil exports employing a small percentage of the domestic labor force. Yet the state's relationship with its citizens was reduced to its expenditure on consumption subsidies.

In 1978 when the country-wide mass demonstrations and workers' strikes erupted, the dictatorship found itself alone in the middle of a storm. The bourgeoisie didn't have an actual organization and the means to protect the state against any attack coming from other classes. The atmosphere of oppression and fear, the censorship and the restrictions of the individual freedoms had already led the urban middle class to a great discontent. When the revolutionary wave was battering the dictatorship, the army had no ally to rely on and carry out a military coup to protect the state, even at the expense of sacrificing Pahlavi. And unlike 1953, this time imperialism was in a big uncertainty<sup>8</sup> and when it did not support Pahlavi publicly, the army and the bourgeoisie understood that the end of their king's reign has come.

## **3) The opposition was organized on a large scale**

There were various forms of organized struggle against the Pahlavi regime. Beside political organizations, workers' organizations, neighborhood committees and craftsman's associations also played important roles in this struggle. The Islamic movement was also involved in the mass demonstrations. The movement was strengthened by the financial support of the petty-bourgeoisie and merchant capital during the economic development. With the support of the Bazaar, big places were built for sermons and religious ceremonies. Most of them were built in villages and poor neighborhoods in the big cities. Mosques and religious ceremonies created a broad network for Islamists. As a result, the social power of the traditional conservatives increased and they became able to reach people who they had never contacted before. Moreover, the Bazaar was not only a structure that provided financial sources for the Islamic movement, but also had a power

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<sup>8</sup> Elena Reynolds, "A New Era in American Foreign Policy: Jimmy Carter, Human Rights and Iran", *The Forum: Journal of History*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2012.

to mobilize masses they could reach.<sup>9</sup> In 1978, the merchants and artisans of the Bazaar organized the first mass protests of the upcoming revolutionary wave along with the seculars. Eventually, the Islamic movement took the control of the revolutionary wave at the final stage of the revolution.

In addition, when the rebellion took over the country, the struggle of the working class hit the dictatorship deeply. The oil industry workers were perhaps the most organized workers of that period. Throughout 1978, large strikes in the oil industry put the state in a difficult position. Finally, the release of the political prisoners months before the revolution revived the guerrilla organizations, as the hottest days of the revolution were coming. A strong network of struggle was created against the dictatorship. Khomeini had already established his leadership over masses. So, these organizations could only act alongside the masses, despite the fact that their armed struggle against Pahlavi's loyalists on the last days of the revolts was decisive.

#### **4) The myth of Pahlavi's invincible dictatorship was damaged**

During the era of deep dictatorship in Iran when Pahlavi believed that there was no serious opposition against his reign, a series of guerrilla actions occurred in the early 1970s. These guerrilla operations continued intensively until the mid 1970s. These operations and actions were mostly organized and performed by two major anti-capitalist groups, one from the Marxist movement and another from the radical Islamic movement. Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (or People's Fedai), the Marxist organization, started the first guerrilla action and the radical Islamist People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (or People's Mojahedin) joined the guerrilla struggle right after Fedai Guerrillas. These two groups had a massive influence in destroying the myth of Pahlavi's invincibility.

Actually the war between guerrilla groups and Pahlavi's security forces came to a deadlock in the mid-1970s. On the one hand, the regime forces didn't achieve a massive success in controlling or destroying these organizations. On the other hand, the guerrilla groups were not able to trigger a mass movement inside the society against the dictatorship. But this was not a complete failure for the opposition. As a result of these struggles, the fear and oppression policy of

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the bazaar, albeit weak but as an ally of Pahlavi, could not have taken a role in the revolution. The children coming from the families of craftsmen and tradesmen were constituting a large proportion of the university students and graduates. These young people were gradually finding a place in the bureaucracy and in the new professions that required expertise. Moreover, the rich merchants of the Bazaar were involved in industrial projects supported by the state. But Pahlavi's regime tried to bring the self-governing merchants, craftsmen, artisans and their organizations under state control. In the mid-1970s, Pahlavi began to attack the traditional mechanism of the Bazaar under the name of anti-corruption policies. Pahlavi by his own hands pushed the Bazaar away and strengthened his opponents.

Pahlavi's regime became ineffective. The guerrilla struggle characterizes the last decade of the Pahlavi era. People were telling the stories of this struggle as they were talking of the ancient epics. The struggle was a source of inspiration for many poems, stories, songs, and even movies. It brought back the most needed self-confidence to the masses against the Pahlavi dictatorship. The guerrilla struggle could not organize the masses directly against Pahlavi's regime, but it destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the dictatorship in the eyes of people.

### **The rise of the religious dictatorship**

However hopeful the 1979 Revolution was, its results were reactionary enough to even surprise those who had a big role in realizing it. The revolution overthrew an imperialism-backed dictatorship and destroyed its seemingly powerful fortress. However, after the revolution Khomeini and his followers established another dictatorship on the ruins of the previous one. The name of the new dictatorship with even more reactionary ideas was called the Islamic Republic. This dictatorship was established step by step. It started with attacking on every progressive aspect of the revolution such as demands for social and democratic rights. They used their widespread mosque network, in most of the districts and neighborhoods, to organize attacks. The fundamentalists quickly established their own brand of revolutionary committees and parallel organization such as Islamic revolutionary security forces, Islamic revolutionary courts etc. In each step, surely there were opportunities to stop or at least challenge the foundation of the new dictatorship. However, the political and organizational weakness of the opposition paved the way for the fundamentalists. In each step the Islamic Republic became much more powerful and eventually the state of dictatorship was restored after suppressing all political and social oppositions.

A few days after the revolution Khomeini ordered to cancel the law protecting the family. According to this law men were not allowed to choose a second wife until they have permission from their first wife and also a woman had the right to divorce in case her husband was marrying a second wife. This law was canceled only two weeks after the 11th of February. On March 9, the women's right to judge was removed and on March 11 the Hijab (the head and body covering in Islamic fashion) became compulsory. Women organized the largest protest by women in the history of Iran on March 8 against the orders of Khomeini. Tehran hosted a week of rallies and protests, regarding which the progressive forces and the intellectuals largely remained silent.

Only two months after the revolution a referendum took place asking people to choose between the new system and the old, but without defining the new system or giving any details. In a two-choice referendum of accepting the new regime of the Islamic Republic or the old regime of the Shah, having already overthrown the old regime, the people naturally were obliged to accept the new

form of the state. A major feature of this referendum was the lack of transparency about the details of the new form of the state, i.e. the Islamic Republic. Khomeini defined the Islamic republic as a state in which all would enjoy their rights. In response to a question of a journalist asking “what is the Islamic Republic?” the prime minister of the provisional government responsible for organizing the referendum said, “it is a nice thing.” People voted in the referendum in favor of the Islamic Republic whereas they didn’t know what it really was. According to the official records, 98 percent of the electorate participated in the referendum and 99 percent of them approved the Islamic Republic.

The dictatorship was built step by step but there was no serious objection to it. Leftist organizations, which called the March 8 movement a petty-bourgeois demand, boycotted the referendum because of the Islamic Republic’s undefined character. The boycott was not supported by all leftist organizations and the Tudeh Party supported the new form of the state. The People’s Mojahedin, conditionally accepted the Islamic Republic and declared that if the people’s interests are secured they will support the new regime unconditionally, otherwise they will cut their support completely.

The provisional government led by Islamist liberals defended the idea of a republic without any qualifications, but gave support to the Islamic Republic after Khomeini’s rigid reaction of “only Islamic Republic, no more, no less.” The referendum didn’t face any mass opposition and because of that the new regime’s supporters called the opposition “the 2 percent.” It is true that organizing the masses against Khomeini the charismatic leader of the revolution would not be easy, but the only chance to move the people had already been lost during the March 8 incident.

To restore the state of dictatorship there was another step to be taken and it was going to be done through the new constitution. The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (Velayat-e Faghih) was the last signal for the emerging dictatorship. The constitution, giving all the political power to the religious leader of the Islamic Republic, was submitted to the referendum on November 1979. There were important developments before the referendum.

At the beginning of August, *Ayandegan*, an opposition newspaper, was closed down by the so-called revolutionary court. The newspaper was a frequent target of assaults by the fundamentalists. Within a few days, a large march was organized by the leftist and secular groups in Tehran. The march was attacked by the fundamentalists and hundreds of people were injured. In the wake of this march, more than twenty newspapers and journals were closed down by the revolutionary prosecutor. When this attack on the opposition media caused reactions, Khomeini made his unforgettable speech about the democratic rights and freedoms. He said that if they had already acted in a revolutionary way, and had broken the pens of the press, closed down the parties, punished the rulers of

these parties and executed them everywhere, they would not face these troubles. After the speech, a large attack against the press began and dozens of journalists were arrested or executed over time.

Furthermore, before the referendum on the new constitution a war started in Kurdistan region of Iran. Having found their hopes crushed in the new state, ethnic minorities put up resistance.<sup>10</sup> The Kurdish people rose with a demand for autonomy in Kurdistan. The centralist government in Tehran interpreted it as an attack on Iran's unity and attacked Kurdistan using the new army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. A long war started in Kurdistan during which some of the leftist organizations gave their support to the struggle of the Kurdish people. Beside the March 8 women's rallies against regime's reactionary decisions, the *Ayandegan* events and the Kurdish uprising were two important developments in the early stages of the restoration of the dictatorship in Iran. The country was preparing for a new constitutional referendum, accompanied by these important developments that should awaken the masses and political organizations.

With such a background people voted in the constitutional referendum. For the second time the people accepted the new changes with a huge percentage. Most of the leftist organizations again boycotted the referendum and found it anti-democratic, but the Tudeh Party and the majority wing of the People's Fedai gave their full support to the constitution. The People's Mojahedin this time cut their support.<sup>11</sup>

This so-called revolutionary constitution imposed Khomeini on the masses as the religious leader during his lifetime. In addition, it provided the ground for the construction of the state organs needed to ensure the monopoly of the power in the hands of the fundamentalists. The next step toward the reconstruction of the dictatorship was the elimination of the opposition. Naturally, the relationship between the Islamic Republic and the opposition after the referendum became increasingly tense. Meanwhile, the Iraqi army attacked Iran in August 1980, and a long war began. Khomeini described the war as God's mercy and grace.

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10 After the revolution beside the Kurds' demand for autonomy other ethnic groups also struggled for their social and democratic rights. One of the main struggles took place in Turkmen Sahra in the North East of Iran. Right after the revolution Turkmans established the Turkmen People's Councils. These councils distributed the big landlords' lands among villagers. The People's Fedai acted alongside the councils in this region. Within two months after the revolution the Islamic revolutionary guards started a war in Turkmen Sahra. The Islamic republic with two different attacks on the democratic resistance of Turkmens imposed its control in this region within a year. Along with Turkmens and Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs also raised their voice for their ethnic rights. Unsurprisingly these demands also were suppressed by the Islamic Republic.

11 The only meaningful objection came from another ethnic region, Azerbaijan, and mainly from its largest city Tabriz. Surprisingly a conservative party called the Muslim People's Party, followers of a prominent religious leader, rose against the Velayet-e Faghih, but the uprising was harshly suppressed by the so-called revolutionary army.

Khomeini's followers used this extraordinary situation created by the war to suppress the opposition. They eliminated the opposition from the state's power mechanism, wiped out the social opposition from Iran's political arena and did not allow any voices to be heard, just within three years.

In the light of this information, the post-revolutionary process can be divided into two stages with their own characteristic features. The first stage includes the years 1979-1981, which is a transition period. This phase is characterized by a confrontation between the founders of the Islamic Republic (Khomeini and his fundamentalist followers) and their opponents. Right after Pahlavi was overthrown by mass demonstrations, Khomeini and his followers started to establish their own power. Some of the groups and organizations showed their opposition from the early days of the revolution, and some of them later cut their support for the founding wing and joined the opposition. At this stage, the masses and the opposition benefited from a relative freedom. The opposition newspapers and journals were widely circulated during this period and large political rallies, demonstrations and marches were organized. In this phase, the form of the opposition to the Islamic Republic was generally political.

In the first stage, Khomeini's fundamentalist allies were organized under the umbrella of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), and the opposition was broadly organized under organizations of the People's Mojahedin, the People's Fedai, Tudeh, Peykar, and other anti-capitalist organizations, especially those which had participated in the anti-Pahlavi struggle. This period was a historical opportunity for these organizations. These organizations, which were unable to directly contact with the masses for years during the Pahlavi despotism, were able to organize mass rallies and quantitatively reach significant numbers. For example, the meetings and rallies organized by the People's Fedai were several times larger than those organized by the IRP. There also appeared numerous new Marxist or anti-capitalist organizations beside the existing ones. By 1981, many of these freedoms were increasingly restricted.

The second stage includes the years 1981-83. It begins in June 1981 with a major crisis between the People's Mojahedin and the Islamic Republic, and eventually ends in 1983 when the last anti-capitalist organization was eliminated. Khomeini and his followers threw the liberals away from state power and did not allow any opposition voice to be heard. In this phase, the form of opposition to the Islamic Republic was the armed struggle, especially carried out by the People's Mojahedin. A number of Marxist groups also participated in the armed struggle, but the main force of the opposition was the People's Mojahedin. At this stage, the progressive forces were subjected to great massacres, and the Islamic Republic seized all the gains of the revolution one after another. The post-constitution period witnesses the elimination of the opposition from Iran's society. The elimination took place step by step, first by exterminating the opposition

that publicly declared its defiance against the new dictatorship, then by erasing the post-revolutionary society from the new regime's supporters but potential opposition organization, such as the Tudeh Party. The organized actions of some political parties and organizations, even relatively intensive armed struggle, couldn't find mass support and were suppressed in the brutal way possible.

### **The hijacked revolution**

The 1979 Revolution is an example of defeating a political and military power of a bourgeois state ruled through a strict dictatorship with a social organization. The revolution was the product of a popular movement and struggle for a democratic society. These struggles form the distinctive feature of the revolutionary period. The social contradictions that emerged after the 1953 Coup triggered this mass movement. The revolution was not based on Islamic motives or was not started to establish an Islamic society. The masses went out into streets to determine their own destiny. However, most of their achievements and gains were taken back by the construction of the religious dictatorship.

With the revolutionary uprising, different types of social organizations appeared in the society. Workers, peasants and neighborhood committees were established. The women's movement, which opposed the patriarchal conservative order, the oppressed nations' movements against the racist policies of the chauvinist state and many other organizations all emerged in this period. These organizations and movements were all attacked by the newly formed dictatorship which was led by Khomeini.

The large participation of the poor in the revolutionary uprising played an important role in conquering the revolution and demolishing the Pahlavi dictatorship. This participation was naturally based on certain material foundations, and it later raised concrete demands after the revolution. The wide poverty, a product of unequal development, created a great discontent toward Pahlavi's regime. This dissatisfaction became a great wrath against the bourgeoisie which was struggling with the economic crisis. After the revolution this wrath showed its results. Most of the large state or private enterprises went into workers' control. In some regions the peasants seized the lands of the big landlords and divided them among themselves. In large cities, neighborhood committees established social aid networks for the elderly and orphans. The poor struggled for the recognition of their social rights and occupied empty villas and luxury houses which belonged to the rich who fled Iran after the revolution. The intensity and determination of the demands for social justice, forced the fundamentalist Islamists into the direction of nationalization in the private sector. Unfortunately, these gains were also attacked later by religious dictatorship. Beside the remaining bourgeoisie from the old order, a new bourgeoisie was born too, and eventually Iran became a country ruled with severe neoliberal policies.

Another important achievement of the revolution was the acquisition of democratic rights. Iranians, who lived under repressive dictatorships in a long period of their modern history, were enjoying freedom after the revolution. The publication of many newspapers and books, organization of meetings, rallies and similar activities around social issues, immediately after pulling down the Pahlavi dictatorship show how they missed freedom. The masses, for the first time, felt the meaning of the fundamental social and individual rights, such as the freedom of expression and association. The rights to participation in political activities, demonstrations and strikes, and the right to elect and to be elected were gained as a result of their struggle. Although the oppressed nations couldn't achieve their rights, at least they ensured the recognition of their very basic rights in the new constitution. Like other achievements, the democratic rights were also targeted by the religious dictatorship. Only a few years after the revolution, society faced a new regime of oppression, fear, death and injustice. In a short time people lost the justice, freedom and democracy they gained through rebellion and resistance. The fundamentalist Islamists established a new regime of dictatorship under the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran on a more reactionary basis than the one people demolished.

Some of those who played a role in the realization of the 1979 Revolution and then were eliminated by the fundamentalist Islamist group led by Khomeini, believe that the revolution was hijacked. Some Marxists argue that a counter revolutionary process took place in that period. The post-revolution phase may be regarded as a kind of a counter-revolution. However, the force that seized the power by purging other groups actually emerged from inside the revolution and had popular support. Therefore, it may not be right to define this process as a counter-revolution. This process can be explained by the hijacking of the popular revolution and the betrayal of its gains by the fundamentalist Islamists.

The fact that the revolution was hijacked can be discussed around two themes: the demand for the social rights that the revolution formed around and the demand for the political power. After the revolution the main demands of the revolutionaries, freedom, independence and social justice, were never realized literally. The people's demand for freedom was met with a new mechanism of oppression. A despotic regime was established instead of a democratic republic that the people struggled for. The independence was reduced to some practices and anti-US slogans. And the social justice never exceeded some populist discourses. Neither the poor (Mostazafin) became the owner of the revolution (as Khomeini claimed), nor other segments of the society benefited from the gains of the revolution. Women became the first victim of the new regime and lost their limited rights with the religious laws. The religious minorities were in no better situation than before; Bahais and Sunni Muslims even faced greater pressure. The demands of ethnic groups were reduced to a constitutional recognition of

their mother tongue education, the article that was never implemented in practice. And almost no independent organization of the working class survived the brutal attack of the religious dictatorship. Moreover, after the revolution, within a bloody period, the fundamentalists led by Khomeini eliminated or brutally purged all segments of the revolution from the political power. They limited or even nearly prevented the direct or indirect participation of the masses in the mechanism of the power. With this aspect, they replaced the Pahlavi dictatorship with a religious dictatorship.

Khomeini returned to Iran with a program to seize the political power. When the revolutionary uprising was battering the foundations of the Pahlavi dictatorship, Khomeini hid his reactionary identity behind his populist rhetoric. Later, the fundamentalist Islamist group, using the influence of Khomeini's charisma on the masses, gradually destroyed the gains of the revolution. However, there is a reason to describe the post-revolutionary process as a kind of a counter-revolution. It is known that Khomeini negotiated with the US representatives before returning to Iran and gave some assurance to the United States on certain issues.

### **Khomeini's negotiations with the USA**

In 1978, when there was a mass uprising shaking the foundations of the Pahlavi dynasty, M.R. Pahlavi turned to the powers he trusted, especially the United States. However, he did not receive the support he expected. The US ambassador to Tehran reported to the US President that a more serious operation than the 1953 coup is needed to protect Pahlavi and he believed that such a reaction to the mass uprising would not be appropriate. Realizing that the Pahlavi regime is about to fall, the US officials decided to establish relations with Khomeini and negotiate with the leader of the new era. Khomeini had been recently forced to leave Iraq and was spending the last few months of his exile in Paris. In fact, Khomeini and his followers benefited from this seemingly compulsory choice.

In Paris Khomeini as the leader of the mass movement had an opportunity to closely communicate with the world. During his short stay (about 4 months), Khomeini tried to introduce himself and his Islamist movement to the world. According to Ahmad Khomeini,<sup>12</sup> who was with him in Paris, Khomeini was working intensively in Paris, and he was making about five interviews with the international press every day. He did not only speak to the press, he also had meetings with some official representatives from countries such as the United States. These meetings were usually carried out by the liberal wing of the Islamist movement that surrounded Khomeini in Paris. These persons later had important positions inside the provisional government. According to the documents

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<sup>12</sup> Ahmad Khomeini's memories: امام راگدای تارطراخ ، امام راگدای تارطراخ ، نارهت ، ص ۷۲-۹۵ ، ۱۳۷۵

released by the CIA in 2016,<sup>13</sup> there is an intense communication traffic between the US and Khomeini in January, just before the revolution. Concerns and mutual expectations of two sides were discussed in this period. The most important concerns of the US were the division or dissolution of the army, possible rise of communists, the form of the power transfer, the security of the US citizens in Iran, the security of the US capital in Iran, the oil and the military and the political relations with the US. The concerns expressed by Khomeini and the Islamist movement (fundamentalists and conservative liberals) were the possible coup by the army, the rebellions within the army, the security of the airplane carrying Khomeini when entered Iran's airspace, and the possible interference of the US in Iran's internal affairs.

As a result of those negotiations, based on its influence in the Iranian army, the US assured Khomeini that it would not organize a coup against him. In return, Khomeini convinces the US that they are not a fundamentalist movement. From this perspective, it is no surprise that the provisional government is generally composed of liberals. This agreement, even if for a short time, also reveals itself in mutual tolerance between fundamentalist Islamists and the United States.

In the early days of the revolution, some members of the People's Fedai occupied the US embassy in Tehran. The US ambassador then contacted the foreign minister of the provisional government and asked for help. When Khomeini disapproved of the occupation, the foreign minister convinced the People's Fedai to end the occupation. The foreign minister apologized the US ambassador and told him that the occupation had been done by the uncontrolled forces of the revolution and assured him that the safety of the embassy would be provided. Khomeini was aware of, and actually ordered, that assurance. This is evidence that the Islamic Republic had no anti-imperialist or anti-US tendencies at the beginning. What we know now as anti-imperialism is a populist rhetoric. It only has an anti-American nature, which later emerged from their opportunism.

### **The theoretical and political weakness of the left**

Khomeini and his followers revealed their reactionary nature in March 1979. They clarified the exact form of the regime they desired to establish in the referendum of the Islamic Republic. And eventually, they declared their absolute demand for the power in the constitutional process. Meanwhile, the opposition, struggling with dilemmas and contradictions, or living in dreams, left their fate in the hands of the new regime.

The emergence of the new Marxist movement and organizations (especially) in the 1960s was based on the fact that the Tudeh Party did not exhibit any

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<sup>13</sup> Two Weeks in January: America's secret engagement with Khomeini, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36431160>.

meaningful resistance against the 1953 Coup. With this analysis, the political struggle remained in the shadow of the practical struggle in the war against the Pahlavi dictatorship. The armed struggle characterizes the pre-revolutionary period, although it didn't trigger a mass movement against the dictatorship. The Pahlavi Dynasty was overthrown by a spontaneous uprising of the masses and the Marxist left welcomed the revolution with mixed thoughts. They started revising their strategies. However, except the Tudeh Party, most of the organizations had lost their major and senior theorists in the armed struggle or found them executed in Pahlavi's prisons. Therefore, some of the Marxists followed the reconciliatory policies of the Tudeh Party toward the Islamic Republic. The remaining part was hesitantly waiting for their fate. Eventually, the Marxist movement like the People's Mojahedin became subjected to a brutal destruction on a large scale and was never able to recover.

The collapse of the Marxist organizations in Iran took place before the collapse of the Soviets. Thus, the collapse of the socialist left in Iran was a result of internal dynamics on a large scale. These internal dynamics include the theoretical and political weakness of the organizations, as well the brutal efforts of two oppressive states to cruelly destroy the progressive forces.

The Iranian Marxists did not have enough theoretical skills to analyze the Iranian society and its developments. The Tudeh Party was blindly following the theses of the Soviet Union. Being aware of a widespread discontent in masses toward the Tudeh's allegiance to the Soviets, the People's Fedai preferred to remain independent from the Soviets, but they did not have enough theoretical background to conduct analysis on their own. They lost their potential theoretical leaders in the struggle against the Pahlavi dictatorship. As the guerrilla struggle before the revolution did not achieve a great gain, and when they saw the overwhelming power of the working class in the process of the revolution, they turned to Bolshevism. But they could not establish the necessary connection with the working class. They lacked a concrete knowledge of Iran's modern history and the state of its society. After the revolution, none of the Marxist groups had any research on Iran's working class. They also had no concrete analysis toward determining the class position of the political actors in the society, their place in the national struggle against dictatorship and in the international struggle against imperialism. As a matter of fact, after the revolution, Marxists did not know how to contact the working class, and even worse, they had difficulty in determining the nature of the Islamic Republic that would end their lives. They could not realize the difference between the Islamic Republic's desire to establish a religious dictatorship and their rhetoric of independence from foreign powers.

Marxists did not have any program to seize the political power, event didn't have such a desire. They saw the destructive power of the masses, but could not believe that they may have this power behind them. They accepted their fate

and surrendered to Khomeini. The struggle against imperialism and to expel it became their sole goal. When Khomeini and his followers monopolized the propaganda of anti-imperialism by anti-American rhetoric, Marxists became completely unarmed. They missed all the opportunities that had the potential to pave the way for the struggle against the Islamic Republic because of their sole anti-imperialism, or sometimes their latent nationalism. They even did not prepare for a possible attack from the Islamic Republic and eventually lost the war very easily.

People's Mojahedin, on the other hand delayed all the opportunities for the sake of opportunism. They were very late in realizing the fact that Islamic Republic will not tolerate any opposition. By then, Khomeini and his followers had created all the mechanisms to preserve the power they had gained. The fundamentalist group amassed the whole power in their hand, pushed the opposition and the masses away from the state structure and strengthened its foundations and replaced the Pahlavi dictatorship with a religious dictatorship.