

Is There Democracy in Iran's Future?
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I was in and out of Iran the year (1978) just before the country fell to an Islamic Revolution. As an observer, it was clear that a revolt was brewing; young demonstrators were marching daily, howling for the Shah to step down (actually, the chant was "death to the Shah"). This sort of turmoil had roiled the country before: in the 1920s when the new shah, Reza Pahlavi, outlawed the veiling of women; in 1952, when a populist prime minister wanted to nationalize the oil company run by British Petroleum.

Mohammad Mosaddegh, an aristocratic landowner and descendant of the previous dynasty, has been mythologized as a great believer in modernization. He was not, having said publicly that public education, particularly for girls, was a bad idea and he did not much like voting. He was a nationalist who wanted the old nation, not the modernizing one, to prevail.

The Shah had made an agreement with British Petroleum to pay Iran 51 percent of the revenue, the same deal that the United States had with Saudi Arabia. Mosaddegh wanted the whole thing, not 51 percent. And he did get that, which thrilled the young demonstrators, who thought that what would follow would be a democratic republic.

The United States has long been blamed for smothering this democracy in its cradle. The Shah returned to power, chastened by his near demise, and established what he hoped would be a "revolution from the top," a "White Revolution." Little known was how close the country had come to falling under Russian communist control, and how the clergy helped, with their own demonstrations, to put an end to this revolt.

Should the United States continue to apologize for their role, an action that led to the next 15 years of modernization that lifted more Iranians out of poverty than ever in their history? The White Revolution certainly pumped money into nation-wide public schools; it protected women from underage marriage and promoted their participation in society; and engaged in a program of land reform, selling the land to peasants for the price claimed by landowners (to avoid taxes). The peasants got the land they had worked with 30-year mortgages and received training in modern agronomy. And the much-delayed process of industrialization began, with automobile assembly plants. Workers new to factory work had to learn how to tell time (clocks, and not the sun), come to work on time, and learn skills light-year different from peasant labor.

By 1978, however, the public's rising expectations were not rising fast enough. The Shah's budget was not enough to cover the ambitious programs he had envisioned. Thousands of students, many from peasant families, sent abroad or to Iranian universities, got a taste of revolution (the West already had a bout of it in 1968) and they demanded democracy, a socialist version being the most popular. Why did this revolution succeed when so many earlier ones failed?

Students marching in the streets could not prevail alone; but when aided by the clerics led by the venerable Ayatollah Khomeini (representing "justice"); labor strikes by oil workers (during a cold winter); and the closing of the bazaars, where most Iranians shopped and banked; and finally with the junior military joining the revolt, the Iranian government fell and the Shah left.

What happened next is spelled out in painful detail by Misagh Parsa, author of *Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How it Might Succeed*. The Ayatollah lied, and rather than returning from exile to be a figurehead of virtue, he returned to seize the country, making his headquarters in a girls' school (the girls evicted) and setting up an Islamic Revolutionary Party in the confiscated Israeli Embassy. Khomeini never minced words after taking power "Preservation of Islam itself is more important than the lives of Muslims." Democracy is based on humans, who could fall into error.

The Ayatollah lied about supporting political freedom, until he seized power and, like all other revolutionaries, ushered in a reign of terror and a poisonous religious ideology. Next week, Parsa's assessment of Iran's simmering new revolution.

680 words

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