

The Islamic Republic: Revolution, Institutions, and Everyday Life

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Introduction

This book offers a clear, comprehensive guide to the Islamic Republic of Iran as both a revolutionary project and a governing system that has endured for more than four decades. Rather than treating the Revolution as a singular event sealed in 1979, we

follow its afterlives through institutions, policies, and habits that structure the ordinary rhythms of life. By tracing how ideals of Islamic governance, republican representation, and national independence were translated into constitutional design and everyday practice, the chapters that follow aim to illuminate not only how the state works, but also how people live with it, negotiate it, and sometimes resist it.

Any serious account must begin with origins. The downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy emerged from converging pressures—rapid state-led modernization, widening social inequalities, clerical mobilization, anti-imperialist sentiment, and broad coalitions that fused religious, leftist, and nationalist currents. The Revolution's early years were marked by intense contestation, war, and institutional experimentation. Out of this turbulence came a constitutional order that embedded the principle of *velayat-e faqih* alongside republican institutions, setting up a system defined by dual sources of authority and recurrent tension between elected offices and unelected oversight bodies.

Understanding that system requires attention to both its formal architecture and its informal networks. We explore the roles of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, the presidency, the Majles, the judiciary, and parallel institutions such as the IRGC, the Basij, the Expediency Council, and the bonyads. These bodies do not operate in isolation. They overlap and compete, shaping who may stand for office, which laws are enacted, how courts interpret legislation and religion, and how national priorities are implemented or stalled. The book highlights how these institutional interactions produce cycles of opening and closure, reform and retrenchment, and how such cycles reverberate through households, workplaces, schools, and streets.

To connect state structure with social consequence, the analysis draws on three complementary methods. First, we incorporate interviews with officials, clerics, activists, professionals, students, and families across multiple provinces to capture the variety of lived experience. Second, we engage in close legal reading of constitutional provisions, parliamentary statutes, and regulatory directives to show how formal rules travel from text to enforcement. Third, we examine policy case studies—subsidy reform, family law, internet governance, public health expansion, and urban planning—to demonstrate how decisions made in elite arenas create incentives, constraints, and opportunities that shape daily life.

Everyday life is the key lens. The question is not only what the state intends, but what people do with those intentions. Citizens navigate media filters and connectivity barriers, balance religious observance with professional aspirations, and weigh risks and rewards in elections where candidate vetting and factional bargaining narrow choices. Women confront family law and labor markets that both open and close doors; youth craft cultural spaces within and beyond official boundaries; ethnic and religious minorities experience inclusion and control in unequal measure. By attending

to such negotiations, the chapters reveal a politics that is not confined to ministries and councils, but is enacted in classrooms, clinics, apartment blocks, seminaries, and bazaars.

Continuity and change run together throughout this story. Demographic shifts, urbanization, sanctions and oil cycles, technological adoption, and leadership transitions have altered the terrain on which institutions operate. Yet key features—dual authority, powerful oversight bodies, and the mobilizing capacity of security and welfare institutions—have persisted. The result is a system that is at once adaptive and path dependent, capable of policy innovation in some domains and rigid in others, producing uneven patterns of social provision, regulation, and opportunity.

The book is organized to move from foundations to institutions, then from policies to lived realities. Early chapters reconstruct the Revolution's intellectual and political genealogy and the making of the constitution. Middle chapters examine the core institutions and their interactions. Later chapters turn to the political economy of oil and sanctions, the welfare state, education and knowledge production, media and censorship, and the textures of urban and rural life, gender and family, youth culture, civil society, and law enforcement. The concluding chapter returns to the central question of how a revolutionary state endures, asking what has changed, what has remained, and how those dynamics shape the possibilities of everyday life.

Throughout, the aim is accessibility without sacrifice of substance. Technical terms are defined in context, legal arguments are grounded in primary texts, and interview excerpts and case studies anchor analysis in lived experience. Readers can engage the book sequentially for a holistic narrative, or use individual chapters as stand-alone guides to specific institutions and social arenas. Above all, this is an invitation to see the Islamic Republic not as a fixed object, but as a set of evolving relationships between ideas, institutions, and the people who navigate them.

CHAPTER ONE: 1979 in Context: From Monarchy to Revolution

The year 1979 did not simply appear out of thin air, a spontaneous eruption of popular will. Instead, it was the culmination of decades of simmering discontent, clashing ideologies, and transformative, often disruptive, state-led modernization under the Pahlavi dynasty. To truly grasp the seismic shift that brought about the Islamic Republic, we must first journey through the twilight years of the monarchy, understanding the forces that converged to dismantle a seemingly entrenched imperial rule. The Pahlavi dynasty, established in 1925 by Reza Shah, aimed to rapidly

modernize and centralize Iran, drawing inspiration from Western models of development.

Reza Shah, an ambitious military officer, deposed the Qajar dynasty and, after initially considering a republic, established himself as monarch, resurrecting Iran's ancient monarchical tradition. His reign, from 1925 to 1941, saw significant efforts to build infrastructure, establish secular schools, and promote women's participation in public life. He introduced Western-style laws, reorganized the army, subdued local tribes, and sought to diminish the pervasive influence of the Muslim clergy. This aggressive push for secularization and modernization, however, was not universally welcomed and generated considerable resistance, particularly from the powerful religious hierarchy and traditionalists.

Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, ascended to the throne in 1941, inheriting a nation grappling with the legacy of his father's reforms and the pressures of Allied occupation during World War II. The younger Shah continued the drive for modernization, though his early years were marked by political contests, most notably with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh, a nationalist who sought to limit the monarch's powers and nationalize the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, gained significant popular support. However, a 1953 coup, supported by the United States and the United Kingdom, overthrew Mossadegh and reinstated the Shah as an absolute monarch, effectively increasing Western influence over Iran.

This reassertion of autocratic rule, backed by foreign powers, became a recurring source of resentment. From 1953 onward, Mohammad Reza Shah solidified his monarchical dictatorship, continuing his father's policies of Westernization and rapid capitalist development. He centralized the bureaucracy, expanded the army significantly, and poured billions into industry, education, health, and the military. Iran, during this period, experienced impressive economic growth, with real GDP per capita nearly tripling between 1950 and 1979.

In 1963, the Shah launched what he termed the "White Revolution," a far-reaching program of social, political, and economic reforms. These reforms included land redistribution from wealthy landowners to peasants, the establishment of literacy and health corps in rural areas, and significant advancements in women's rights, including the right to vote and hold public office. The White Revolution aimed to transform Iran into a modern, industrialized state, reduce poverty, and integrate the nation into the global economy.

While the White Revolution brought about undeniable economic growth and modernization in certain sectors, its implementation was far from smooth and generated considerable backlash. The land reforms, despite their intention to empower peasants, often led to displacement and dissatisfaction, and productivity sometimes declined. The rapid pace of secularization and Westernization alienated

traditional elites and religious leaders who viewed these changes as a threat to Islamic values and their own influence.

A key figure to emerge in opposition to the Shah's reforms was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He vehemently criticized the White Revolution, particularly the land reforms and the granting of voting rights to women, declaring it an attack on Islam. Khomeini, along with other clerics, saw these reforms as an imposition of foreign values. His outspoken defiance led to his arrest and subsequent exile in 1964, but his message continued to resonate with a growing segment of the population.

The Shah's increasingly autocratic style of governance and the suppression of dissent further fueled public anger. His regime relied heavily on SAVAK, the secret police and intelligence service, which was established in 1957 with support from the United States and Israel. SAVAK was notorious for its brutal tactics, including surveillance, torture, imprisonment, and execution of political opponents, creating a climate of fear across Iran. At its peak, SAVAK reportedly employed approximately 5,000 full-time agents and an unknown number of informers, effectively monitoring citizens and crushing opposition.

This repression, coupled with perceptions of government corruption and the unequal distribution of oil wealth, widened the gap between the affluent elite and the vast majority of the population. Despite rising per capita income, the benefits of economic growth were disproportionately concentrated, leading to increased social stratification and the marginalization of rural migrants in cities. The Shah's failure to address these deep-rooted political grievances and widening socioeconomic disparities created a fertile ground for revolutionary sentiments.

By the late 1970s, a broad coalition of Iranians, encompassing clergy, landowners, intellectuals, merchants, and disaffected citizens, had united in opposition to the Shah's rule. This diverse alliance sought an end to autocracy, Western interference, economic difficulties, and sociopolitical repression. Anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly against the United States, was a powerful unifying force, with many viewing the Shah's regime as overly reliant on foreign powers at the expense of Iran's sovereignty and cultural identity.

The active phase of the revolution began in January 1978, sparked by government press attacks on Ayatollah Khomeini. These attacks led to mass protests in the holy city of Qom, which were met with force by security forces, resulting in numerous casualties. This cycle of protest and repression escalated, with strikes and guerrilla warfare further disrupting the economy. The alliance between the bazaar merchants and the religious establishment, a historical and strategic partnership, proved crucial in mobilizing popular support against the Shah.

As the protests gained momentum and millions took to the streets, the Shah,

weakened by cancer, vacillated between concessions and repression. On January 16, 1979, the Shah and his family departed Iran, bringing an end to the Pahlavi era of monarchical rule. Just over two weeks later, on February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran from exile in France, greeted by a massive crowd of several million Iranians. The armed forces declared neutrality on February 11, effectively dismantling the Shah's regime. The monarchy was officially abolished, paving the way for the establishment of the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini.

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