Could the Shah of Iran have forestalled the Iranian Revolution of 1977–1979?

**Viewpoint:** Yes. The Shah of Iran could have stayed in power had he won the support of the bazaaris (small merchants) and the clergy and promoted democratization.

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The term *revolution* has been used often to describe changes of regime in various lands and countries throughout history, but few are actually true revolutions in the modern sense—most are simply coups d'état, in other words, a change of regime essentially within the ruling class. A revolution denotes something much more dramatic, including a change of power from one class to another and the adoption of an entirely new political ideology. Most revolutionary movements, especially the successful ones, are marked by much death and destruction from years of sustained guerrilla warfare by the opposition in its attempt to overthrow the existing regime and uproot its political, economic, and sociocultural structures and representations. Governments tend to fight back, oftentimes with brutal efficiency, in an attempt to remain in power and crush the opposition.

Unlike other twentieth-century revolutions in China, Cuba, Vietnam, or Nicaragua, there was no systematic guerrilla offensive against the government in the Iranian Revolution (1977–1979). Blood was, indeed, spilled, and some violence occurred during the revolutionary period, but it was episodic and usually the result of unplanned encounters and even misunderstandings between opposition and government forces. The revolutionary movement typically manifested itself in strikes, demonstrations, and protests; mobilization was made primarily through the mosques as it developed. As such, some of the questions remain regarding the Iranian Revolution. Could the ruler of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, have used the formidable repressive apparatus at his disposal, the U.S.-supplied and -trained military and security services, more effectively in order to repress the opposition movement and stay in power? Did the nature of the movement itself, in combination with the fact that the Shah of Iran was terminally ill, obviate the apparent necessity and willingness to unleash the repressive structures of the state against the revolutionary forces marshaled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini? Would it have made a difference in terms of the final outcome had the Shah acted more forcefully?
Viewpoint:
Yes. The Shah of Iran could have stayed in power had he won the support of the bazaaris (small merchants) and the clergy and promoted democratization.

In early 1978 Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, was regarded as one of the richest and most powerful monarchs in the world. Since 1941 he had ruled an oil-rich country that was also strategically important. Since the first National Development Plan (1949) the Shah committed himself to developing Iran's economy and changing its social and cultural foundations. Nationalism and modernization characterized his kingdom: in fact, during World War II (1939–1945) the Shah had committed himself to oppose secessionist attempts in the north of the country and face down the communist threat. He tried to reduce Iran's economic dependence on Great Britain and to limit British supremacy in the oil sector. In order to achieve this goal, he asked for a third power's help, the United States, in an attempt to balance Anglo-Soviet influence in his country. He also tried to transform Iran into a modern country, a regional power with a strong industry and a powerful military, relying once again on American help. His reform program in the early 1960s, known as the “White Revolution,” embodied agrarian and cultural reform as well as modernization. Together with his unparalleled buildup of the military, it was ultimately a self-defeating effort that undermined the Shah's power. On 17 January 1979 he was obliged to flee his country. His repressive policy, starting in the 1970s, from industrialization to pseudodemocratization, resulted in the Iranian Revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Ayatollah had returned to Iran after a fourteen-year exile, having managed to coalesce the diverse opposition to the Shah.

In the second half of the 1950s, thanks to the nationalization of the oil industry and subsequent oil-export income, there had been tremendous economic growth, although it was uneven. This process was changing Iranian society, still organized in a feudal way, especially in the countryside. A new Iranian middle class—professionals and skilled technicians who had studied economics and management abroad—was created. There were also plenty of foreign professionals, particularly Americans. These conditions had already caused an increase in tension within the country and represented a threat to the political stability of the monarchy. The situation worsened in the early 1960s when the Iranian economy was in a state of recession, inflation was high, and the level of productivity was decreasing. This downturn was the result of both an anachronistic power structure and a corrupt administration, which was partially responsible for the deteriorating socio-economic situation. The political realm was not any better— institutions of the Iranian system had not developed or had been turned by the Shah into mere instruments of the regime. In order to improve conditions, it was necessary to carry out a series of structural economic, social, and political reforms, assuring rational and orderly economic development.

On 26 January 1963 the Shah launched the White Revolution. He wanted to use the philosophy of revolution and the reform program as an instrument for the transformation of Iran from a poor, socially feudal-driven, and politically corrupt country into a progressive, industrialized, independent country, following the Western example. In implementing this kind of system, the Shah asserted that “as a nation we must demand steady progress, but we must also realize that the achievement of political, economic and social democracy perse must take time. It requires education and psychological development, the reconciliation of individual wishes with social responsibility, the rethinking of moral values and individual and social loyalties, and learning to work in co-operation more than ever before.” However, Westernization, according to the Shah, had to be “selective and judicious” and had to “help us [Iranians] towards the goal of democracy and shared prosperity” without abandoning “our great heritage.”

In this context the Shah became the guardian of Iran's great tradition, the identity of a sovereign nation with a glorious past and a rich cultural heritage. The Shah's reference to pre-Islamic Persia and the spread of a pro-West culture provoked tenacious opposition by the Iranian clergy. In 1971 impressive celebrations in Persepolis honoring the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire were particularly criticized when the Shah “linked himself directly to Cyrus the Great.” The Shah urged the population to pray for “our Noble Land” and for him, who had been elected by God as “Custodian of the Land of Iran.” Despite his rhetoric, however, the population had grown restless and felt ignored.

The White Revolution program included land reform, nationalization of forests, public sale of state-owned factories, profit sharing in industry, electoral power for women, and the formation of a literacy corps. It was a project designed within the political elite to change radically the face of Iran, turning it into a powerful, modern, and Western-type state.
Iran, however, was structurally almost entirely feudal. Most of its population was dependent on agriculture and lived in isolated small villages. It was at the mercy of its landowners and had little political consciousness. Among the projects planned by the Shah, land reform was the most significant. He was intent on changing the feudal structure of society, redistributing land, and encouraging landowners' investment in the industrial sector. The landowners were powerful; indeed, in the 1960s, 56 percent of the land was owned by 1 percent of the population. The reform limited the ownership of land in each village; surplus land was to be sold to the state to be, in turn, resold to the peasants. By eliminating large landed estates, the power of important social classes, such as the bazaaris (small merchants) and the clergy, who were powerful opponents of the reform policy of the monarchy, was circumscribed. In fact, according to the Shah, bazaaris represented a backward-looking social class, and
their fanatic resistance to any kind of change in creating a modern country had to be eliminated. With regard to the clergy, the Shah decided to wage a frontal attack on its institutions. Besides severely penalizing them financially, the Shah also tried to deprive them of their religious role. In fact, in 1971 he ordered the formation of the Sepa-e Din (Religious Corps) and the Religious Propagandists with the task of spreading a conservative and nonpolitical version of Shiism, showing the compatibility of the monarchy with Shiite religion and testifying to the commitment of the state to religion. Not requesting the bazaar merchants’ cooperation and his unsuccessful frontal attack on the clergy were two of the Shah’s major political mistakes. In fact, bazaaris and the clergy represented two important protagonists of the Iranian social reality: they were the main constitutional actors dating back to the Constitutional Revolution (1906), and in the 1970s they still played an important role as interpreters of the needs of the Iranian population as a whole. They became the mouthpieces of the working class following the industrialization process.

The industrialization process brought an alteration to class structure, rapid urban sprawl, and a decline of the agrarian sector. With the growing industrialization and urbanization, a significant working class emerged, initially in three main Iranian towns: Teheran, Isfahan, and Tabriz. It was a fragmented and heterogeneous class, which had not developed a class consciousness yet, and consequently, at first it did not threaten the Shah and his regime at all. The fact that it had spread only to three towns made it easily controllable by the secret police (SAVAK or Sazeman-e Etela’at va Amniyat-e Keshivar). Most of this new middle class were young immigrants coming from the countryside who, attracted by the towns, were catapulted into a situation quite different from that which the Shah promised. They often suffered under terrible living conditions, packed in unauthorized and rundown boroughs of towns. For them, as for the bazaaris, the modern and earthy ideology promoted by the regime was incomprehensible. They understood the world and their role within society through religious categories. The mosque remained their bedrock, representing at the same time a place of cultural identification and reinforcement.

Undoubtedly, the most significant result of the industrialization process was the development of a new kind of middle class, formed by skilled technicians, bureaucrats, and professionals who had studied and graduated mostly in Europe and had the task of implementing the economic and industrial growth promoted by the Shah. So, there was a close alliance among this new Iranian industrial middle class, the state (represented by the court, the armed forces, SAVAK, and state bureaucracy), and foreign investors, most of whom were American, which only added to the alienation of traditional Iranian social classes. These elite elements benefited most from the reform plan imposed by the Shah, as opposed to the majority of the population.

The Shah tried to modernize the economy and the society without changing the nature of the Persian political system. Although in 1961 he had declared that “if ever I felt that Persia’s monarchy had outlived its usefulness, I would be happy to resign as King and would even join in helping to abolish our monarchical institution,” he affirmed, at that particular moment, that Western-type democracy was not a good fit for Iran. He distinguished between “apparent” and “true” democracy and highlighted that the latter required education and intellectual maturity. In fact, the Shah was mainly interested in legitimizing the monarchical institution and the Pahlavi dynasty. The concept of modernism was often confused and replaced with that of “Pahlavism,” his vision of political, social, and economic progress. The Shah wanted to become a democratic, progressive, and benevolent monarch—to guarantee a certain well-being for most Iranians—as well as be a revolutionary monarch, to represent left-wing nationalism and the leftist National Front.

During the Shah’s reign the political system, state machinery, and politics in general strictly remained under his personal supervision and control. Basic civil freedoms, necessary for a gradual democratization, were denied to the Iranian people. After the dissolution of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) in 1961, the Shah ruled through decrees until 1963. In order to gain the largest popular consensus, he reintroduced the plebiscitary system. A referendum was sponsored in order to enact his White Revolution (the Shah gained 99 percent of support for his program), but above all, it highlighted the fact that the monarchy was the supreme authority. He did not hesitate to use his repressive apparatus, the powerful home-security organization SAVAK, in order to assure the implementation of his program: not only were protest marches put down harshly, but any kind of criticism and opposition was also forbidden. Since 1964 the two-party parliamentary system had been abolished in favor of a one-party system, Iran-e Novin (New Iran), the composition of which was supposed to represent the spirit of the White Revolution. The lack of a democratization process in Iran was
THE NEWS FROM IRAN

A Trinitdadan-born writer of Indian descent, visited Iran after the Revolution and made the following observations:

In August of 1979, six months after the overthrow of the Shah, the news from Iran was still of executions. The official Iranian news agency kept count, and regularly gave a new grand total. The most recent executions had been of prostitutes and brothel-managers; the Islamic revolution had taken that wicked turn. The Ayatollah Khomeini was reported to have outlawed music. And Islamic rules about women were being enforced again. Mixed bathing had been banned; Revolutionary Guards watched the beaches at the Caspian Sea resorts and separated the sexes.

After all that I had heard about the Shah's big ideas for his country, the airport building at Tehran was a disappointment. The arrival hall was like a big shed. Blank rectangular patches edged with reddish dust—ghost pictures in ghastly frames—showed where, no doubt, there had been photographs of the Shah and his family or his monuments. Revolutionary leaflets and caricatures were taped down on walls and pillars; and—also taped down: sticky paper and handwritten notices giving a curious informality to great events—there were colored photographs of the Ayatollah Khomeini, as hard-eyed and sensual and unreliable and rogish-looking as any enemy might have portrayed him.

The airport branch of the Melli Bank—rough tables, three clerks, a lot of paper, a littered floor—was like an Indian bazaar stall. A handwritten notice on the counter said: Dear Guests: God is the Greatest. Welcome to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Bits of sticky brown paper dotted the customs notice boards that advised passengers of their allowances. The brown paper did away with the liquor allowance; it was part of the Islamic welcome.

In the pavement kiosks there were magazines of the revolution. The cover of one had a composite photograph of the Shah as a bathing beauty; the head of the Shah attached to the body of a woman in a bikini—but the bikini had been brushed over with a broad stroke of black, not to offend modesty. A suitcase beside him was labeled To Israel and Bahrung; an open canvas bag showed a bottle of whiskey and a copy of Time magazine.

Khomeini received and preached and blessed; Khalkhalli hanged. He was Khomeini's hanging judge. It was Khalkhalli who had conducted many of those swift Islamic trials that had ended in executions, with particular grandiosity in those particular executions. It was Khalkhalli who had recently been giving interviews, publishing (mingled with men's shops) and the pavement book-sellers and cassette-sellers and print-sellers. The cassettes were of speeches by Khomeini and other ayatollahs; they were also—in spite of Khomeini's ban on music—of popular Persian and Indian songs. Some booksellers had books in Persian about the revolution, its ideologies and its martyrs. Some had solid piles of communist literature—Persian paperbacks, and hardback sets of Lenin or Marx in English, from Russia. One revolution appeared to flow into the other.

And there were photograph albums of the revolution. The emphasis in these albums was on death, blood, and revenge. There were photographs of people killed during the Shah's time; photographs of the uprising: blood in the streets, bodies in the morgues, with slogans daubed in blood on the white tiles; galleries of people executed after the revolution, and shown dead, page after page, corpse upon corpse. One corpse was that of Hoveyda, the Shah's prime minister: the black bullet hole in Hoveyda's old man's neck was clear in the photograph.

All the buildings in the university block—founded by the Shah's father—were disfigured with slogans. The university was the great meeting place of Tehran, and even on a day like this, a day without any scheduled event, it was full of discussion groups. Behzad said, "It goes on all the time." What did they talk about? He said, "The same things. Islam, communism, the revolution." It looked a pacific campus scene; it was hard to associate these young men in jeans and pretty shirts with the bloodiness celebrated in the books and albums across the road.

But violence was in the air, and just after we came out through the main gates we saw this incident. A student in a white shirt, small and with glasses, inexpertly and with some comic effort, taped a leaflet onto the iron rail of the gate. The leaflet was a protest about the closing down of Ayandegan, the paper of the left. A workman near a food stall at the edge of the pavement walked slowly over, drew a red hammer and sickle on the leaflet, crossed the whole sheet with an X, slapped the student twice, in the middle of the pavement crowd; and then, without hurry, taped up the defaced leaflet more securely.

The student had ducked to save his glasses and his eyes. No one moved to help him. Even Behzad did nothing. He only said, as though appealing to me for justice, "Did you see that? Did you see that?"

The two revolutions appeared to flow together, the revolution of Khomeini, and what Behzad would have seen as the true revolution of the people. But they were distinct. The previous weekend Behzad and some of his group had gone to a village to do "constructive" work. They had run into trouble with the Revolutionary Guards: every village had its komiteh, young men with guns who were now the law in parts of Iran. The Guards, Moslems, didn't want communists in the village.

another political mistake committed by the Shah. Therefore, the opposition was forced to adopt revolutionary struggle.

The complete lack of freedom of expression in Iran obstructed the spread of a democratic culture within the middle class, particularly among liberal and social intellectuals. This democratic void favored the development of radical political doctrines, such as Marxism and socialist Shiism, especially among university students. Many young intellectuals were drawn to Islam, interpreted from a revolutionary point of view and the peculiar Messianic expectations of Marxism. This socialist Shiism, in its most radical form, found expression in the mujahideen (holy warriors) who, together with the fedayeen (guerrillas), launched an armed struggle against the Shah. They criticized the modernization program, contested the authoritarian features of the monarchy, and exposed the excesses of SAVAK, which forbade any kind of political debate. In June 1963 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was arrested and exiled for having criticized land reform, women's emancipation, and the announcement of immunity for U.S. personnel based in Iran. Khomeini's anger focused on this latter point, believing that this serious question, together with the coup organized against Muhammad Mussadiq by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1953 in order to restore the Shah's power, highlighted the contradictions in the Iranian sovereign's reform program.

The recession in the second half of the 1970s caused economic and social tensions. Protests against the Shah's policy arose in the main Iranian towns. The urban working class and bazaar merchants were the protagonists of these protests, as they were clearly penalized by measures the Iranian state took in order to deal with the economic crisis. Broad popular unrest, spreading all over the country within a few years, was cleverly organized and led by Iranian clergy. In fact, the lack of success in modernizing the country could be seen in the miserable economic and social conditions of most Iranians. A large part of the population, oppressed and outcast, found in religion the answer to its problems. Hence, Islam increasingly became the only effective mouthpiece of the people's frustration. The Shah did not offer a valid ideological alternative to that preferred by Shiite clergy. He also could not limit the mullahs' activities and did not gain the support of any other Iranian religious faction.

The Shah could have successfully remained in power had he pursued cooperation with the bazaar merchants and the clergy, recognizing the former's important economic role and the latter's undeniable social role. Together with them he could have successfully implemented the complex socio-economic processes in Iran, thus giving voice to a real Persian identity. Moreover, had he managed to promote more democratization, thus allowing the political opposition to express its dissent, he would have prevented the spread of popular unrest, which later became the mainstay of the revolution's success. In this case, the protest would have been absorbed within the political system, and the population could have been represented in the monarchy's institutions. However, the Shah's policies were a total failure, and he fled Tehran: his monarchy collapsed, and by February the Islamic Republic of Iran was born.

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Viewpoint:

No. The Shah of Iran's ouster was inevitable because of his ambivalent policy toward protesters and the charisma of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In the second half of the 1970s the growing intensity of the protest movement left Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, in a difficult political situation. The government had managed neither to quell the riots nor to reach a compromise with moderate factions of the opposition. In the last two years of his reign (1977-1979) the Shah showed himself to be more confused, hesitant, and weak than ever: his strategy vacillated between a reconciliation policy and forceful repression of riots. The protest movement against the Shah's regime was becoming stronger and more widespread among the Iranian people. Under influence from the Americans, in 1977 the Shah initiated a liberalization program by promising to create "a free political atmosphere," assure free elections, end censorship, and allow greater political freedom. This new situation engendered the growth of the popular protest movement that emerged with a reformist, anti-violent focus, backed by lay intellectuals and students. The Shah's attitude was ambivalent toward these protests: on one hand, the popular movement was legitimated when he promised Iranians he would "hear the voice of your Revolution" and "not repeat the past mistakes," such as "lawlessness, oppression and corruption"; on the other hand, the Shah had no scruples about ordering the army to repress protests, introducing martial law, and virtually forbidding demon-
In fact, although there never was a real improvement in the political atmosphere, the Shah was not willing to share his authority with anyone else, least of all with the opposition. In November 1978 the Shah, in a desperate attempt to save his crown, formed a military government, thus entrusting his destiny to the armed forces, the only loyal ally upon which he believed he could rely.

However, the situation became irreparable after the bloody riots of 8 September, known as “Black Friday.” Thousands of demonstrators, not realizing martial law was in force, had gathered in Teheran, and, following their refusal to disperse, soldiers opened fire and killed hundreds of people. The rioting turned into a battle between the demonstrators, who put up barricades and burned buildings, and the police, who responded with tanks. The entire country was in disarray: oil workers went on strike; opposition guerrilla groups threatened government officials; students knocked down a statue of the Shah in front of the University of Teheran; and opposition forces stormed the British embassy, as well as offices of several U.S. companies. These protests expanded to include the middle class, professionals, and civil servants. The popular movement had changed, becoming more organized and violent, and it spread to major Iranian towns. The Iranian clergy became involved by putting religion at the forefront of the political struggle. Mosques, theology schools, and all Islamic centers became vital points of mass mobilization, and the use of Shiite symbols and rituals gave the political struggle a sense of sacredness against the Shah’s blasphemous and profane regime. This mass mobilization undoubtedly led to the success of the Revolution.

In early December 1978 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, from his Parisian exile, ordered the population to demonstrate against the Shah’s regime on the occasion of the holy representations and processions in honor of Ali’s son, Husayn, the fourth Imam of the Twelver Shiites, during the Islamic month of Muharram. These celebrations commemorated Husayn’s martyrdom. Some people, ignoring the curfew, paraded through towns wearing white clothes, a symbol of martyrdom, while others yelled slogans against the Shah. It was a brilliant manipulation of the Shiite religion for a political purpose. Imam Husayn seemed to lead them into battle on the day of his commemoration, and Khomeini seemed to lead them from afar, like a kind of hidden imam. One of the crucial elements for Khomeini’s seizure of power was, as Nikki R. Keddie states, the revival of the "ideological Shi’i tradition that contained elements that he could rework so as to legitimize revolution, republicanism, and rule by a top clerical leader." Khomeini emerged as the sole leader of the Iranian Revolution (1977–1979) and the only alternative to the Shah. The entire opposition rallied around the clergy and Khomeini: liberals, laity, religious liberals, left-wingers, and guerrillas. Huge differences among them were overcome in the name of the only element they had in common: opposition to the Shah. The extreme diversity of the movement, comprising nearly the entire population, also contributed to the success of the Revolution. Men and women from every walk of life, young and old, intellectuals and illiterates, students and professors, professionals and civil servants, workers and bazaaris (small merchants), all proclaimed the end of the Shah’s regime and the formation of a just government that respected Islam’s precepts. The clergy, headed by Khomeini, believed an open confrontation with the government was necessary even if repression and a bloodbath were inevitable. This stance was supposed to highlight the atrocities of the Shah’s regime, leading to the consequent radicalization of the movement.

Actually, the Shah had two alternatives: to pursue an iron-fist policy or to submit to the opposition and leave the country, thus favoring a political solution of the crisis. The former alternative, which was not supported by the Americans, would play into Khomeini’s hands. The latter possibility seemed more realistic. Because of U.S. support over the years, the Shah believed that the Americans would intervene and save his regime, as it had in 1953, but this time his fall was inevitable. In January 1979, while trying to reach a belated agreement with the opposition, the Shah proposed that Shapour Bakhtiar, leader of the National Front, form a new government, and he agreed to leave the country until a solution to the crisis was found. Believing that his absence would be “no more than a matter of days but of hours,” the Shah was overwhelmed by the revolutionary forces and could not return to Iran. At the same time, Khomeini, “in accordance with the rights conferred by the law of Islam and the basis of the vote of confidence given me by the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people,” announced the formation of a Council of the Islamic Republic, with the task of coordinating activities of the opposition to the Shah. In the meantime, Bakhtiar was trying to calm the revolution: he released political prisoners, dismantled SAVAK (secret police), reduced military expenses, and refused to sell oil to Israel. It was, however, too late. People clamored for Khomeini’s homecoming and invited him to become Iran’s new leader. Acknowledging the people’s will, on 1 February 1979, the
Bakhtiar government allowed the Ayatollah to return to Iran. His comeback was triumphant. A poem written for the event by Taha Hijazi well interprets the widespread popular mood:

A poem written for the event by Taha Hijazi

wounded mother / will be liberated forever / from the shackles of tyranny and ignorance / and from the chains of plunder, torture and prison.

Like Ali, Husayn, and other imams of Shi'ism, Khomeini had been oppressed by an unjust sovereign, forced into exile, and from there obliged to fight with all his strength against a tyrant. He had not accepted any compromise with the "satanic tyrant," and, like most Iranians, he lived an austere life, in contrast to the politicians who were corrupt and living in luxury. He seemed sincere, defiant, and, above all, incorruptible. He was a "man of God," not interested in achieving power but rather being the highest spiritual authority. He promised to liberate the country from foreign domination, grant participation to political parties, safeguard the rights of religious minorities, and guarantee social justice—particularly to bazaaris, intellectuals, farmers, and, more generally, to the mostazafin (deprived masses).

In Iran the bond between politics and religion is of paramount importance, and to realize this bond allows one to understand the social and political changes characterizing the history of this country. In fact, the Iranian Revolution was not only political. Certainly, the Shah's tyrannical and repressive regime and the serious economic crisis contributed to incite the uprising. It was also, above all, a religious revolution. Iranians rose up against the secular ethos imposed from above and against their will that attempted to exclude religion from their lives. The Shah had often talked about the greatness of pre-Islamic Iran, and he lavishly celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, changing the starting date of the Iranian calendar from the Pharaoh worshiped. America had corrupted the Shah, and Khomeini represented the only religious alternative to the profane dictatorship. According to the clergy, the unsuccessful attempts at modernizing the country, industrialization, and consequent mass urbanization had led to economic and social misery with growing inequalities. The attempted imposition of Western ideology and culture pushed the population toward Islam, which became, in their eyes, the only possible solution to their problems. Hence, ayatollahs, opposed to cultural and political models imported from outside, became the voice of the Iranian people's frustrations. In the Revolution, the enemy was certainly the Shah, as a bearer of Westernization and a culture of lay and secular elements at the expense of Islam and Iranian traditions, and he was seen as a servant of Western governments. Khomeini argued that Islam and politics were two sides of the same coin: the Prophet Muhammad was at the same time head of the state, commander of the army, and spiritual leader of the community. After his death, according to Shiite Islam, these responsibilities were conveyed to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and from him to his descendants. With the death of the twelfth Imam, the Imamate's cycle was over, and until his return, according to Khomeini, the clergy bore responsibility for leading the community. The Shiite ulma (clergy), economically and politically independent, played a crucial role in the Revolution.

Another pivotal factor for the success of the Revolution was undoubtedly represented by the charismatic personality of Khomeini. He had been the only true antagonist to the Shah, a persistent opponent of monarchy and of foreign cultural influence and domination. He was certainly wise to gather around himself the whole revolutionary movement and impose his absolutist and fundamentalist conception of Islam. His Manichaean vision of the world, divided between oppressed Muslims and oppressor Westerners, also found a receptive audience among left-wing secular elements and the Shiite socialists in the revolutionary movement. As Keddie observes, "the fusion of modern, secular Manichaecism, traditional Islam, and uncompromising hostility to monarchy, dependence, and imperialism created a revolutionary ideology that distinguished the revolutionaries from Western and westernized oppressors." It was a true ideology of mobilization, gathering, under the aegis of Khomeini, bazaaris and the lower classes, yearning for the creation of an ideal society following the Prophet Muhammad's and
Imam Ali’s community. This ideology had a tremendous influence on the Iranian population, and Khomeini convinced the masses of his righteous path. In fact, he gained almost total popular support. The middle class regarded him as a defender of private property, as a backer of its business interests, and as the only one able to abolish the monarchy and put an end to the excessive foreign influence in the country. The working class and peasantry backed him, since they were attracted by his commitment to social justice, agrarian reform, and the construction of schools and public works. The Iranian masses, relying only on their religion, overthrew the Shah’s dictatorial regime without the aid of weapons. Instead of paralyzing the Iranian population, the Shah’s repression caused the opposite effect, inciting people to riot. After years of terror and repression, through the Revolution the Iranian population gained control of their own country’s political life—and there was nothing the Shah could have done about it.

—GALIA VITALI, TARANTO, ITALY

References


