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How To Lose a Country In 38 Years: The 1979 Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 stands out as a fascinating example of a post-Second World War revolution for several reasons. One is that it was the first example of the rising world wide tide of Muslim fundamentalism, which has resulted in the events of September 11th and the military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (Bowden 596). A second reason is that it was the first revolution to take place in an era of nearly instant global communications; the sights and sounds of that revolution were beamed into living rooms all over the world every night (Bowden 190). But perhaps the single most interesting aspect of the Iranian Revolution is that it represents a unique example of a revolution arising from a ruler who successfully managed to anger every significant element of his population.

There are several useful techniques for analyzing the reasons why the Iranian Revolution took place and was successful. In this paper, I will apply the theory of James DeFronzo, who suggests that there are five critical factors that are required for a successful revolution.

DeFronzo's "five factor" analysis requires:

- Frustration among the masses, resulting in unrest and uprisings in the cities or in rural areas.
- The presence of "elite" political movements in opposition to the ruling powers. By "elite" DeFronzo means that these movements have access to wealth, power, specialized skill sets, or higher levels of education than the average population.

- Motivations that serve to unify major classes and that cut across class distinctions.
- Some sort of severe political situation that paralyzes the administrative authority of the state. Such a crisis allows the revolutionary movement to flourish, free of government repression.
- Finally, the rest of the world has to, if not actively support the revolution, at least not interfere with it. DeFronzo calls this "a permissive or tolerant world context" (DeFronzo, 20-21).

Frustration among the masses, leading to uprisings in both urban and rural areas, was clearly present in Iran under the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Shah Mohammad took over power from his father in 1941, and continued many of his father's policies designed to build up the middle class and suppress the influence of Islamic clerics in the country (Pahlavi 68). Shah Mohammad's policies led to a coup in 1951 that briefly knocked him out of power (Pahlavi 84); he was restored to power in an unpopular counter-coup (backed by the West) in 1953, and resumed his unpopular policies (Pahlavi 89-90). Shah Mohammad also established an extensive patronage system to reward the segments of the population that restored him to power (and kept him there) as well as a vicious secret police force known as SAVAK (Barheni 7-8). Ultimately, Shah Mohammad's paranoia led to a total seizure of power, and the abandonment of any pretense of democratic government, as part of the "White Revolution" of 1961 (Coughlin 125).

As part of the "White Revolution" Shah Mohammad instituted land reform in Iran. Specifically, he redistributed agricultural land among the sharecroppers who were farming it, thinking that this would buy their loyalty to his government and assist in the modernization of the Iranian agricultural system (Pahlavi 102-103). Unfortunately, the plots of land the

sharecroppers received were too small for them to make a living. This resulted in many people, who had previously been farmers and sharecroppers, migrating to the cities (Bani-Sadr 122-123). Unfortunately, the cities were unprepared to receive a massive influx of people, especially people who were basically unskilled in anything except farming. This, in turn, resulted in a large population of people living in squalid conditions, which was a perfect breeding ground for unrest and dissent among the displaced agricultural population (DeFronzo 285-286).

Additionally, after the 1953 counter-coup and the "White Revolution", Shah Mohammad also began stronger measures designed to crack down on opposition within Iran. Specifically, he expanded the use of SAVAK against dissenters (Coughlin 125-127). He also expelled many dissidents, including Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964 (Coughlin 110). During this period, dissent against the regime of Shah Mohammad continued to increase: there were active "terrorist" movements engaging in bombings and other acts of opposition to the regime (Coughlin 133-134). This in turn led Shah Mohammad to increase repression of these dissident movements, which led to more dissent, which led to more repression, in what might be called a "fatal spiral". At the same time, Shah Mohammad was also actively rewarding members of his extended family and strong supporters of his regime, to the point where the rule of Shah Mohammad became almost a "kleptocracy" in which the various parties were in competition to see who could steal the most from the people of Iran (Baraheni 42-44). The end result of Shah Mohammad's system of rewards was extreme class stratification; Iran was dominated by a very small class of people, essentially Shah Mohammad, his extended family, and a very small number of favored supporters (Baraheni 43-44). Meanwhile, the rest of the

upper, middle, and lower classes were left to fend for themselves from the leavings of this elevated upper class, and without any voice in how the country was run (Coughlin 139).

As long as oil revenue kept increasing, Shah Mohammad could, more or less, sustain his regime. Agricultural reform meant that Iran could not produce enough food internally to feed the population (DeFronzo 288), but oil money allowed the country to make up for this by purchasing food from outside Iran. Oil money also allowed the economy to grow by increasing industrialization and industrial production, which in turn led to a demand for manufacturing labor. However, after the 1975 OPEC oil embargo ended, the United States and other countries began cutting back on their use of oil. Iran felt the sting of these cutbacks first, since oil revenue was so important for filling the gaps. With the fall in oil revenue, Iran's foreign debt increased, and the country began to have trouble paying for imported goods like food (Coughlin 141). This in turn resulted in massive inflation, reaching 30% by 1977 (DeFronzo 295). Massive inflation in turn led to a reduction in purchasing power. Ultimately, the country ended up with a large population of people who didn't have enough money to purchase basic goods, had been cut off from meaningful participation in government, had been displaced from their homes and their way of life, and were looking for something or someone to bring about a change; basically, the definition of DeFronzo's "mass frustration".

Thinking about DeFronzo's "elite political movements", there are two major groups worth considering here. The first group is the disenfranchised upper and middle class members of Iranian society. As we saw previously, the society was dominated by the Shah's family and a very small number of favored political figures. The rest of Iranian society had little or no influence on how things were run. However, they did have some money when the economy

was good, and the ability to travel abroad. More importantly, they had the ability to send their children abroad for educational purposes. Those children were able to travel to the United States and Europe, to learn at major universities, and came back to Iran hoping to build up the country. Much like their parents, those children ended up being frustrated by the kleptocracy that was running Iran, and began looking for help changing the way things were done. Many of those students were influenced by the dissident Islamic clergy, who (for better or worse) was one of the few elements in Iran at the time that was actively working for change (DeFronzo 291-294). In retrospect, it appears that the students and other young people who were involved in the revolution did not expect the new regime to become the theocracy it evolved into (Bowden 615-631), but it is often said "hindsight is 20/20".

In addition to the students influenced by foreign study, a major portion of the middle class movement involved the "bazaaris", the shopkeepers and merchants who ran much of Iran's economy. During the Shah's rule, much of the country's economy revolved around the "bazaaris", called that because they ran the bazaars that everyone depended on for goods. Iran was not, at the time, a nation of supermarkets, so the bazaars and the people who ran them were necessary. However, Shah Mohammad believed that the bazaar system was out of place in a modern Iran, and wanted to move the country in the direction of a more modern system of shopping centers and supermarkets. For that reason, he continued policies adopted by his father that were intended to marginalize the bazaaris (Coughlin 44-45). During the runaway inflation that marked the end of the Shah's rule, the bazaaris were persecuted as "profiteers", causing even more of a loss in the Shah's support among the middle classes (Coughlin 132).

The second pivotal elite political movement was the Islamic clergy. Dating back to Shah Mohammad's father, Shah Reza, the clergy had been the subject of various rules, regulations, and other attempts to marginalize their role in Iranian society (Coughlin 68-74). The Shah and his government wanted to establish Iran as a society run on secular principles, not religious ones, and certainly not the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam advocated by the clerics (Pahlavi 101-129). The clerics, on the other hand, believed that God was on their side, and they had nothing to lose. Further, they were tired of being pushed to the edges of society by the Shah's regime. The fact that, as Iran became more and more industrialized, it relied to an increasing extent on the West, also played into the clerics role in the revolution. The Islamic clerics saw the West as being decadent and depraved, and felt the increasing reliance of Iran on the West was contributing to the decline of the country (Coughlin 127-128). It was better, they felt, to throw out the Western influence and establish an Islamic government. Ideally, the precepts of Islam would harmonize with the needs of the country, and the clerics would be able to establish a perfect Islamic theocracy. Most importantly, the Islamic clerics had an unprecedented ability to mobilize the population. Because so much of the population attended worship services, the Islamic clerics could reach virtually everyone, and were able to effectively communicate their message of revolution and Islamic rule. The ability of the Islamic clerics to network with and mobilize the population, much of which did not have access to mass media, should not be underestimated; this was perhaps the single most important element contributing to the success of the revolution (DeFronzo 291).

With respect to DeFronzo's third condition, motivations cutting across class boundaries, there are several aspects to consider. One motivation was, of course, religion, as personified by the Islamic clerics discussed previously. A second major motivation, also previously

discussed, was the extreme class stratification of the government, and the lack of meaningful opportunities for political participation. The "bazaaris", previously discussed, are an important factor here. This group of middle class merchants had substantial control over the economy, yet was constantly marginalized by the Shah's regime.

Yet another major motivation was the massively repressive government of Shah Mohammad. It is impossible to overstate how much SAVAK was feared and despised by the average Iranian citizen. Reza Baraheni, a noted Iranian literary critic and victim of SAVAK, claimed that an average of 1,500 people **a month** were arrested by the secret police, and that the total number of political prisoners (as of 1975) ranged between "25,000 and 100,000" (Baraheni 6-7). Much like the late unlamented Stalinist Russia, anyone could become a victim of SAVAK, and for any reason. Finally, extreme inflation and poor economic conditions in general also served as a strong motivation that cut across class boundaries. An inflation rate of 30% affected everyone in the population; while it may have hit the lower class hardest, even the upper class was not insulated from that high a rate of inflation (Coughlin 98).

DeFronzo's fourth condition is "a severe political crisis paralyzing the administrative and coercive capabilities of the state" (DeFronzo 10). In order to understand the nature of the crisis that Iran faced at the time of the revolution, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Iran and the West. Basically, Iran was seen as a stalwart ally in the Middle East, and a bulwark of the Western defense against the Soviet Union and international Communism. During his rule, and especially during the post-World War II period, Shah Mohammad played up his role as the Middle East's defender of Western ideals, and Iran's role as the metaphorical "finger in the dike" against Communism (Pahlavi 145-

174). Because Shah Mohammad was seen by the West in this light, and because Middle Eastern oil and anti-Communism were both vital to the West, Shah Mohammad enjoyed the unquestioning support of the United States and other Western countries up until early 1977. Indeed, the counter-coup that returned Shah Mohammad to power, and the "White Revolution", are both believed to have been heavily backed by the Central Intelligence Agency (Pahlavi 89-91).

Once Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States, however, the relationship between Iran and the West began to change. President Carter placed a great emphasis on human rights, and clearly did not believe that those rights took a back seat to the defeat of international Communism. Repression in Iran had come to the attention of organizations such as Amnesty International, and those organizations in turn put pressure on Western governments to modify, or even end, their support for the regime of Mohammad Shah (Coughlin 139-140). The United States and other Western governments, in turn, put pressure on Mohammad Shah to allow more freedom for the Iranian people. Mohammad Shah, feeling pressure from the West to liberalize or lose Western support, reluctantly backed away from the more repressive elements of his rule (Pahlavi 164-166). This, in turn, led the Iranian population to exploit their newly found freedom to the maximum extent possible, and to push the limits of Mohammad Shah's reforms. Mohammad Shah, in turn, could not return to the previous repressive measures he used to keep dissent under control, for fear of permanently losing Western support. Essentially, he was caught in the middle between a newly freed and highly outraged population, organized by Islamic clerics into a highly effective lobby for reform, and the West, whose support he was afraid of losing if he cracked down too hard on dissent (Coughlin 138-146). The resulting crisis paralyzed Mohammad Shah's regime until it

was too late to do anything except free the country. (It is also worth noting that Mohammad Shah was, at the end of his reign, suffering from a terminal illness (Bowden 498). This, too, probably had a paralyzing effect on the "administrative and coercive capabilities of the state".)

Finally, DeFronzo's last condition is a "permissive or tolerant world context" for revolution. At the time, the major superpowers in the world were the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviet Union had no motivation to intervene on the side of Shah Mohammad. Quite the contrary; Shah Mohammad was, as we have seen, no friend of the Soviet Union, and that country greeted his downfall with joy (Pahlavi 170). On the other hand, the United States reaction was much more complicated. Shah Mohammad had been a great friend of the United States for many years, to be sure. But the presidency of Jimmy Carter was recovering from the revelations of Watergate and of secret CIA activities abroad (such as the attempted killing of Fidel Castro) ("Church Committee"). The United States was in no mood to support open or covert activities in Iran designed to interfere with the right to self-determination of the Iranian people. In addition, the repressive nature of the Shah's regime had managed to offend most of the Western world. While he was in power, they were willing to overlook the nature of the Shah's regime. But with the Shah out of power, there was really no popular support for returning him to the throne and going back to the old days of SAVAK (Pahlavi 11-34). Finally, the Shah's terminal illness left him unfit to rule, so the Western world would have had to find an alternative leader. The Carter administration vacillated between non-intervention in Iranian affairs and supporting a military coup led by Shapour Bakhtiar (Coughlin 21-22). But the Revolution became too deeply entrenched, especially after the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran, for outside forces to be

able to find a substitute leader friendly to the West and acceptable to the ruling classes (which swiftly became no longer the ruling classes) (Coughlin 173-174).

We have established that the Iranian Revolution meets all five of DeFronzo's criteria for a successful revolution. It might also be useful to look at the revolution from another perspective as well. Allan Todd divides revolutions into two types: political revolutions and social revolutions. Todd defines "political revolutions" as occurring when societies are transformed by social or economic changes, but the existing leadership of those societies holds back reform until they are displaced. "Social revolutions", on the other hand, Todd defines as attempting to transfer both economic assets and power (both social and political) from one group to another (Todd 4).

This raises an interesting question: should the Iranian Revolution be considered as a social or a political revolution? In light of the history outlined in this paper, it is the belief of this author that classifying the Iranian Revolution as either social or political is a mistake. The Iranian Revolution had elements of both the social and political. Specifically, Iranian society was being transformed by social and economic changes arising from increased industrialization, the decrease of oil revenue, and the displacement of former agricultural workers to the cities, yet the regime of Shah Mohammad tried to hold back reform of society based on those changes. On the other hand, much of the basis for the revolution was the transfer of power away from the regime of Shah Mohammad, and towards previously disenfranchised elements of Iranian society; specifically, the upper and middle classes, and the Islamic clergy.

Finally, what were the values of the two sides of the revolution? That is a somewhat difficult question to answer for both sides. If Shah Mohammad is taken at his word, as in his

memoir *Answer to History*, the values he held were maintaining the independence of the Middle East (especially Iran) against the Soviet Union, the economic development and modernization of his country, and eventually the establishment of representative democracy in Iran when his people were ready for it (Pahlavi). However, those who opposed the regime, such as former president Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr in *My Turn to Speak*, argue that the true value of the Shah's regime was making himself and his family rich at the expense of the Iranian people (Bani-Sadr). Somewhat independent observers, such as the poet Reza Baraheni, agree with Bani-Sadr and his point of view (Baraheni 88-109).

As for the revolutionaries, it seems obvious that their primary value was the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran. However, what seems obvious is not necessarily so. Bani-Sadr, throughout his memoir, argues that Ayatollah Khomeini was deceptive and misleading about his intentions, and the type of government he intended to establish, during his exile and up until he had firmly established power (Bani-Sadr 1-20). Bani-Sadr goes on to imply that his final break with the Ayatollah and his regime (under which Bani-Sadr served as President of Iran) was precipitated by Khomeini's insistence on establishing an Islamic theocracy (Bani-Sadr 161-172). Independent observers such as Con Coughlin agree with this position (Coughlin 1-15). It seems clear that the revolution was actually a coalition not just of the religious, but of many different groups with many different values. Mostly the revolutionaries were simply people who were disgusted and fed up with the Shah and his rule, and who were looking for democratic reform.

Ultimately, the Iranian Revolution is a fascinating turning point in history. It was a "made for television" revolution that took place at just the right time in history. It marked the beginning of major clashes between Western ideals and Islamic fundamentalism. Finally, the

Iranian Revolution serves as a classic example of how an out-of-touch leader can alienate an entire population, and lose an entire country.

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