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Early Life and Clerical Activism

Imam Khomeini was the grandson and son of mullahs (Shi'i religious leaders). When he was about five months old, his father

was killed on the orders of a local landlord. The young Khomeini was raised by his mother and aunt and then, after their deaths, by his elder brother, Mortaza (later known as Ayatollah Pasandideh). He was educated in various Islamic schools, and about 1922 he settled in the city of Qom, Iran's intellectual center for Shi'i scholarship. He became a prominent scholar there in the 1930s and became known by the name of his hometown, Khomayn (also spelled Khomeyn or Khomein). As a Shi'i scholar and teacher, Khomeini

produced numerous writings on Islamic philosophy, law, and ethics, but it was his outspoken opposition to Iran's ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, his denunciations of Western influences, and his uncompromising advocacy of Islamic purity that won him his initial following in Iran. In the 1950s he was acclaimed as an ayatollah, a major religious leader, and by the early 1960s, he had received the title of grand ayatollah, thereby becoming one of the supreme religious leaders of the Shi'i community in Iran.

In the early 1960s, the shah suspended parliament and launched an aggressive modernization pro-

gram known as the White Revolution, which included increased emancipation of women, reduced religious education, and a populist land reform law that upset the existing aristocracy. The implementation of these policies especially reduced and disenfranchised the powerful influence of the clerical class, but it also widely disaffected Iranian life and society: it harmed rural economies, led to rapid urbanization and Westernization, upended traditional social norms and values, and prompted concerns about democracy and human rights. Thus, opposition to the government united conservative clerics, the secular left, and others, who often found common ground under a banner of Shi'i identity.

It was at this time that Khomeini became an outspoken critic of the shah's program, and he inspired anti-government riots, for which he was imprisoned in 1963. After a year's imprisonment, Khomeini was forcibly exiled from Iran on November 4, 1964. He eventually settled in the city of Al-Najaf, Iraq's intellectual counterpart to Qom. It was there that he began formulating and promulgating his theories of *velayat-e-faqih* ("guardianship of the jurist") that would lay the foundations of an Islamic republic in Iran. He cultivated a large following while in exile and established a strong and influential network that positioned him to play a commanding role in the overthrow of the shah.

The 1979 revolution, which brought together Iranians across many different social groups, has its roots in Iran's long history.

These groups, which included clergy, landowners, intellectuals, and merchants, had previously come together in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11. Efforts toward satisfactory reform were continually stifled, however, amid re-emerging social tensions as well as foreign intervention from Russia, the United Kingdom, and, later, the United States. The United Kingdom helped Reza Shah Pahlavi establish a monarchy in 1921. Along with Russia, the U.K. then pushed Reza Shah into

exile in 1941, and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi took the throne. In 1953, amid a power struggle between Mohammed Reza Pahlavi took the throne. In 1953, amid a power struggle between Mohammed Reza Shah and Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.K. Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) orchestrated a coup against Mosaddegh's government.

Years later, Mohammad Reza Shah dismissed the parliament and launched the White Revolution—an aggressive modernization program that upended the wealth and influence of landowners and clerics, disrupted rural economies, led to rapid urbanization and Westernization, and prompted concerns over democracy and human rights. The program was economically successful, but the benefits were not distributed evenly, though the transformative effects on social norms and institutions were widely felt. Opposition to the shah's policies was accentuated in the 1970s when world monetary instability and fluctua-



tions in Western oil consumption seriously threatened the country's economy, still directed in large part toward high-cost projects and programs. A decade of extraordinary economic growth, heavy government spending, and a boom in oil prices led to high rates of inflation and the stagnation of Iranians' buying power and standard of living.

In addition to mounting eco-



conomic difficulties, socio-political repression by the shah's regime increased in the 1970s. Outlets for political participation were minimal, and opposition parties such as the National Front (a loose coalition of nationalists, clerics, and non-communist left-wing parties) and the pro-Soviet Tudeh ("Masses" party) were marginalized or outlawed. The social and political protest was often met with cen-

sorship, surveillance, or harassment, and illegal detention and torture were common.

For the first time in more than half a century, the secular intellectuals - many of whom were fascinated by the populist appeal of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a former professor of philosophy in Qom who had been exiled in 1964 - after speaking out harshly against the shah's recent reform

program - abandoned their aim of reducing the authority and power of the Ulama (religious scholars) and argued that, with the help of the ulama, the shah could be overthrown.

In this environment, members of the National Front, the Tudeh Party, and their various splinter groups now joined the ulama in broad opposition to the shah's regime. Imam Khomeini continued

to preach in exile about the evils of the Pahlavi regime, accusing the shah of irreligion and subservience to foreign powers. Thousands of tapes and print copies of Imam Khomeini's speeches were smuggled back into Iran during the 1970s as an increasing number of unemployed and working-poor Iranians – mostly new migrants from the countryside, who were disenchanted by the cultural vacuum of modern urban Iran – turned to the ulama for guidance. The shah's dependence on the United States, his close ties with Israel—then engaged in extended hostilities with the overwhelmingly Muslim Arab states—and his regime's ill-considered economic policies served to fuel the potency of dissident rhetoric with the masses.

Outwardly, with a swiftly expanding economy and a rapidly modernizing infrastructure, everything was going well in Iran. But in little more than a generation, Iran had changed from a traditional, conservative, and rural society to one that was industrial, modern, and urban. The sense that in both agriculture and industry too much had been attempted too soon and that the government, either through corruption or incompetence, had failed to deliver all that was promised was manifested in demonstrations against the regime in 1978.

The Revolution

In January 1978, incensed by what they considered to be slanderous remarks made against Imam Khomeini in *Eṭṭelā'āt*, a Tehran newspaper, thousands of

young madrasah (religious school) students took to the streets. They were followed by thousands more Iranian youth – mostly unemployed recent immigrants from the countryside – who began protesting the regime's excesses. The shah, weakened by cancer and stunned by the sudden outpouring of hostility against him, vacillated between concession and repression, assuming the protests to be part of an international conspiracy against him. Many people were killed by government forces in anti-regime protests, serving only to fuel the violence in a Shi'i country where martyrdom played a fundamental role in religious expression. Fatalities were followed by demonstrations to commemorate the customary 40-day milestone of mourning in Shi'i tradition, and further casualties occurred at those protests, mortality, and protest propelling one another forward. Thus, in spite of all government efforts, a cycle of violence began in which each death fueled further protest, and all protest – from the secular left and religious right – was subsumed under the cloak of Shi'i Islam and crowned by the revolutionary rallying cry *Allahu Akbar* ("God is great"), which could be heard at protests, and which issued from the rooftops in the evenings.

The violence and disorder continued to escalate. On September 8 the regime imposed martial law, and troops opened fire against demonstrators in Tehran, killing dozens or hundreds. Weeks later, government workers began to strike. On October 31, oil workers

also went on strike, bringing the oil industry to a halt. Demonstrations continued to grow; on December 10, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in Tehran alone.

During his exile, Imam Khomeini coordinated this upsurge of opposition – first from Iraq and after 1978 from France – demanding the shah's abdication. In January 1979, in what was officially described as a "vacation," the shah and his family fled Iran. The Regency Council established to run the country during the shah's absence proved unable to function, and Prime Minister Shahpur Bakhtiar, hastily appointed by the shah before his departure, was incapable of effecting compromise with either his former National Front colleagues or Imam Khomeini. Crowds in excess of one million demonstrated in Tehran, proving the wide appeal of Khomeini, who arrived in Iran amid wild rejoicing on February 1. Ten days later, on February 11, Iran's armed forces declared their neutrality, effectively ousting the shah's regime. Bakhtiar went into hiding, eventually to find exile in France.

Leader of the Islamic Republic

From the mid-1970s Imam Khomeini's influence inside Iran grew dramatically, owing to mounting public dissatisfaction with the shah's regime. Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein, forced Imam Khomeini to leave Iraq on October 6, 1978. Khomeini then settled in Neauphle-le-Château, a suburb of Paris. From there his supporters relayed his tape-recorded messages to an increas-

ingly aroused Iranian populace, and massive demonstrations, strikes, and civil unrest in late 1978 forced the departure of the shah from Iran on January 16, 1979. Imam Khomeini arrived in Tehran in triumph on 1 February 1979 and was acclaimed as the religious leader of Iran's revolution. He announced the formation of a new government four days later, and on February 11 the army declared its neutrality. Imam Khomeini returned to Qom as the clerical class worked to establish their power. A national referendum in April showed overwhelming support for the institution of an Islamic republic, and the constitution of the Islamic republic was approved in a referendum in December. Imam Khomeini (RA) was named rahbar, Iran's political and religious leader.

Imam Khomeini himself proved unwavering in his determination to transform Iran into a theocratically ruled Islamic state. Iran's Shi'i clerics largely took over the formulation of governmental policy, while Imam Khomeini arbitrated between the various revolutionary factions and made final decisions on important matters requiring his personal authority. There are arguments from certain quarters that Imam Khomeini embarked on a revenge mission after taking power, however, this argument lacks evidence, what we know is that the Imam did not in any way employ such evil tactics, he had won power not by force but peacefully. If there is anyone who suffered from thousands being massacred, it was the followers of Imam Khomeini and not

vice versa.

Another argument that lacks support is that of the suppression of women by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Contrary to what the enemies of Iran have been peddling all along, The Islamic Republic of Iran has given womenfolk unprecedented powers to participate at any level of power. Iran is one of the countries with the highest number of women in universities. If the Islamic Revolution had cracked on women's advancement, how come we have such a situation prevailing in the Islamic Republic?

The main thrust of Imam Khomeini's foreign policy was the complete abandonment of the shah's pro-Western orientation and the adoption of an attitude of unrelenting hostility toward both superpowers, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Pondering over what has been discussed in this article,

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one is amazed at how the Islamic Revolution in Iran managed to overthrow one of the world's most powerful regimes out of power. Imam Khomeini who was armed with not by guns and any military hardware dislodged the Pahlavi dynasty who ended up fleeing from Iran to Cairo, Egypt where he died a disgraced death far away from his homeland.

There are many lessons that we can draw from this development. Imam Khomeini never in his lifetime agitated for violence as a means to achieve peace. His enemies, however, imposed on his peaceful country the Iran-Iraq war. They encouraged and armed former Iraq dictator Saddam Hussein to attack Iran. The end result of that war was the loss of millions of people caught in between a senseless war.

Furthermore, it can be argued that since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the country has continued to register enormous scientific scores that have left the western countries with an egg on their faces. Today, Iran has achieved self-sufficiency in almost every sector of its economy. Today, Iran is the only Islamic country to develop its own Covid-19 vaccine. Iran consumes what it manufactures and is less dependent on imports. All this can be attributed to the efforts of Imam Khomeini and his team who have continued on the path that they started to this day. Today, Iran is a beacon of peace and development in the region and a shining example to the world.