

The Iranian Revolution and Its Implications

*In late 1978, just prior to the fall of the Pahlavi regime, you published your book Iran: Dictatorship and Development. Much has happened since then to challenge and modify your analysis. How would you assess subsequent political and economic developments in Iran?**

In one sentence, I would say that the revolution was a product of the contradictions that I tried to analyse, but that it has failed to resolve almost any of them, and has, in addition, created new problems for Iran. It is a fundamentally false answer. Let me set the arguments of my book in their political and intellectual context. It was written during the years 1976 and 1977 and reflects, above all, questions that were being posed at that time. It is not a work about the revolution, and I certainly do not claim to have predicted the shape or outcome of the revolution. It is a book about the

particular policies and international dimensions of the Pahlavi regime, locating these within an overall analysis of the political and socio-economic system. It also presented an argument against right-wing analyses of Iran—and some left-wing ones too—that were current at that time. Conventional academic and press coverage was stressing the positive achievements of the White Revolution and echoing the Shah's claim that Iran could become a second Japan. The predominant strand in left-wing analysis reflected the opposite view, phrased in dependency theory or in Maoist theories about 'semi-feudalism', that no significant socio-economic development was possible under capitalism in the third world. More specifically, it was claimed that Iran in the mid-1970s remained much as it had been in the 1950s and was still under the domination of imperialism, which prevented it from developing. My own view, formed by the debate on imperialism taking place at that time and in particular by the work of Bill Warren and related critiques of dependency theory, sought to identify the ways in which capitalist development had transformed Iran while, simultaneously, identifying the weaknesses, economic, social and political, of that development. In this sense Warren, and those like myself who were influenced by him, returned to the classical Marxist position, of the *contradictory* effects of capitalist development. The failings of the White Revolution were evident in agriculture, industry and urban social conditions, but this did not imply that Iran remained a 'semi-feudal' country or that the Shah had not transformed it to some degree. Indeed, it was precisely the substantial but contradictory character of this transformation that provided the objective, socio-economic, context for the revolution.

My own analysis, then, was partly the product of theoretical debates within the socialist movement about imperialism, about the new 'sub-imperial' role of countries like Iran and Brazil, and about the contradictory role of the USSR with regard to the third world revolutionary movement. In attempting to identify the specific characteristics of the Pahlavi state, I was also encouraged by contemporary discussion of Poulantzas's research on the state and its relation to classes and of the work of such writers as Hamza Alavi on the 'post-colonial' state.

I had visited Iran as a student and had had continuous contact with the Iranian Left from the mid-1960s onwards, both around issues relating to dictatorship in Iran and, later, in solidarity work with the revolutionary movement in Oman. The book was a product of that relationship—in part a reflection of opposition views, in part a debate with them. Many things in the book offended Iranian readers—not least my refusal to portray the Mosadeq period as entirely successful, and my assessment of the Tudeh Party, which, while critical of its policies, refused to categorize them simply as traitorous or opportunist. One Iranian exile, Ahmad Faroughy, attacked me for not giving sufficient attention to the role of British imperialism. But, as anyone who has read the book carefully would know, the purpose of the discussion on imperialism was not to dismiss its importance, but rather to specify more precisely

* This interview with Farid Nouri was given to the independent Iranian Marxist journal *Zaman-e Now*, which is published in London.

what its role had been. The subsequent history of Iran has shown that not all the problems of the Iranian people stem from imperialism.

There were, however, deficiencies in the book that subsequent events were to bring out. First of all, while the analysis was correct in stressing capitalist development in Iran, it understated the degree to which this was uneven. In particular, it failed to appreciate the extent to which pre-capitalist sectors and ideologies, represented by the Bazaar, had survived and flourished and could play a significant oppositional role. Secondly, in its discussion of the traditions and significance of political forces in Iran, the book placed too much emphasis on the secular opposition of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and underestimated the clerical forces of 1963. I knew about Khomeini from Iranian associates, but shared with many of them the view that he was a man of the past. I am happy to say that I have never held illusions about Khomeini and have never said anything positive about him. But I did not fully grasp the degree to which he would be able to consolidate his own clerical power after the revolution. Thirdly, the book underestimated the fragility of the Pahlavi state and the possibility of its rapid demise. Looking at events in Chile and other repressive capitalist countries, I could not see how the Shah's military dictatorship could be overthrown in the near future by popular mobilization alone.

The Islamic revolutionary forces were able to take power in February 1979, and their success in consolidating their position is impressive. In this sense, the analysis of my book is of historical interest: the political situation in Iran in 1987 is quite different. But in another sense, the questions raised remain relevant, because, despite their monopoly of state power and their great popular following, the clerical forces have done little to resolve the underlying problems of Iran, the ones I identified in my book a decade ago. The great achievement of the revolution has been its ability to mobilize people—the entering of politics by millions of urban and rural inhabitants is an immense change that marks a break with the whole pattern of past periods. But this mobilization has been misled and deceived. First of all, there has been no resolution of the problem of democracy: the population lacks elementary political freedoms and is subject to manipulation, terror and enticement by the state as it was under the Pahlavis: the mullahs have shown as much contempt for the people as did the Shah. The whole revolutionary process has enabled the Iranian people to learn little about democracy. Secondly, it has provided no solution to the problem of the nationalities. The armed resistance movements of the Kurds, Arabs and Baluch have been crushed, and the Azerbaijanis appear to remain, as before, tolerant of the regime. Pahlavi centralism has been replaced with Islamic dictatorship and the creation of an ethnically diverse state remains as remote as ever. Thirdly, there has been no solution to the cultural and ideological problems of the Iranian people. The Shah offered one solution—the import of Western values, plus the fabrication of a pre-Islamic imperial tradition. Khomeini's solution is equally unproductive and artificial, in that it imposes a recently confected strand of Islam alien to the Iranian people.

Social and economic problems constitute a fourth major area of failure.

Iran remains as dependent as ever on oil exports for its foreign exchange (non-oil exports accounting for a mere one or two per cent of the total), agricultural output is still stagnant, industrial production is inefficient and capacity underutilized, there is mass unemployment and there has been no literacy campaign. While the upper social groups are not as rich or influential as they were, a bourgeoisie remains and the mass of the population have seen no increase in their standard of living. For women, the revolution has entailed a net retreat from the limited advances of the Pahlavi period, despite or rather partly because of the fact that, as in European fascist movements, large numbers have been mobilized behind authoritarian and traditionalist banners. Finally, Iran's international position remains highly unstable—demagogic conflicts with the USA and USSR, coupled with the murderous war with Iraq, have caused the Iranian people great damage and diverted it from a resolution of its own problems. These foreign policies have, at the same time, prevented the Iranian revolution from playing the positive international role that it could potentially have fulfilled, particularly vis-à-vis the revolution in neighbouring Afghanistan. An independent revolutionary Iran could have provided economic and political assistance to Kabul and mitigated its reliance on the USSR.

How do you see the future of the war between Iran and Iraq?

There remain three broad questions, the answer to which will only be given by future events. First, the course of the war. It is possible that the Iraqis can hold on indefinitely and confine it to a war of attrition. But the likelihood of some Iranian breakthrough appears greater—if not a straight victory on the battlefield, then a combination of military pressure with some change of leadership in Baghdad. That brings us to the second question: what Iran wants in Iraq. The present position is clear and intransigent: Iran wants to establish an Islamic republic in Iraq. The Iraqi Shi'ite population has not staged an insurrection against the Ba'th Party, but a client provisional government, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Iraq, is already available in Tehran and there can be little doubt that it would be imposed if the opportunity arose. The question is, rather, whether Tehran would accept peace from a government of national unity that emerged from a crisis of the Ba'thist state or would push on for complete control. On past performance, the Iranian government would demand the maximum and continue the war until it got it. The third issue concerns the international repercussions. The Arab states are frightened, and would make peace with Iran. The one country that could intervene to occupy part of Iraq would be Turkey: the official Turkish view is that the Kurds in Turkey will never be pacified as long as the Iran–Iraq war goes on, and the Turkish army could certainly seize northern Iraq as it did northern Cyprus in 1974. On a broader canvas, both the USA and the USSR are concerned about developments, not so much because of what local states can do, as because of the possibility that the other might gain an advantage from, or intervene in, a crisis situation in the Gulf. The dangers of great power confrontation in the region are considerable and constitute yet another, negative, consequence of the policies of the Islamic revolution.

Overall, this war has been an extremely negative development for the

peoples of both Iran and Iraq. It has caused immense damage, in human and economic terms, to their countries. It has diverted a huge proportion of the temporary benefits from oil. It has stirred up myriad chauvinist and sectarian sentiments in the region. Despite all that these regimes say about the past, my impression is that relations between Iranians and Iraqis were rather calm over the centuries. The war has created new ties of dependency between both countries and their arms suppliers. Both the Ba'hist and Khomeinist regimes bear responsibility for the outbreak of the war and its continuation. But there can be no doubt that it was Iraq which invaded Iran in September 1980, and on this point the Tehran regime's demand for international designation of Iraq as the aggressor is quite reasonable.

How would you assess the role of the Iranian version of Islam in relation to the superpowers?

It is a mistake to talk of Islam as if it were one homogeneous movement or ideology, or as if it could be treated as an autonomous social force. As a religious belief, Islam has some uniform characteristics, but as a political and social movement it is diverse, varying in each country in its social context and political significance. Political Islam in Iran is an urban movement, in Afghanistan it is rural. In Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and contemporary Iran, Islam is an ideology of state hegemony. In other societies it acts as the expression of opposition tendencies, in particular articulating the ideas of social groups dominated by the state: this has been true in Turkey, Egypt, Syria and, before 1979, Iran. Similarly, as Iran well shows, different people can derive wholly different interpretations from the same texts—the conservative quietism of a Burujerdi and a Sharriat-Madari, or the activism of a Khomeini. All religions permit of multiple political interpretations, and Islam is no exception. In political terms, there are as many 'Islams' as there are movements claiming to be Islamic.

The rise of militant Islamic movements in the late 1970s reflected a specific combination of social and political factors, and in particular rapid, but contradictory, urbanization and socio-economic change in Islamic states. As such, it challenged a range of states of concern to the major powers: Iran in the case of the USA, Syria in the case of the USSR. The use of Islamic ideology by the opposition in Afghanistan was also of great concern to the USSR, and provided an opportunity for the USA to undermine a Soviet ally. In fact, Islam is not the problem in Afghanistan: anyone can go to the mosque and pray. 'Islam' rather stands for a set of social and political practices that the 1978 revolution and the strengthening of the state threaten—the autonomy of the countryside, the power of landlords and tribal chiefs, the subordinate position of women. The meaning of Islam there, as elsewhere, is given by the particular state–society contradiction.

Both the USA and the USSR therefore see Islamic movements in terms of the strategic and regional benefits or threats that these present. The USA favours the Islamic oppositions in Syria and Afghanistan, and seeks to promote Islamic dissent in the USSR. The USA also favours the Islamic legitimation of its allies—such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. But where,

as in Egypt, Turkey and Tunisia, Islam is an ideology used against pro-US states, a different political response arises. For the USSR the situation is also contradictory, and Soviet policy in such states as Afghanistan and South Yemen has been to encourage the regimes to use Islam for state purposes. Islam is the official religion in both countries and the state pays the salaries of mullahs and the expenses of mosques. Within the Islamic regions of the USSR, there are substantial social and economic problems, and considerable discontent; but, again, this is not to do with Islam as a religion, and the rioting seen in Kazakhstan towards the end of 1986 was a product of party corruption and favouritism. I visited Baku in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1984 and formed the impression that the standard of living and benefits from integration into the USSR, in addition to the power of the central state, were such that any Iranian-style resistance was improbable; this does not mean that other issues—of local autonomy and cultural nationalism—do not play a part. Ultimately, the answer to the question depends on what happens in each different Islamic country or region.

Do you see any revolutionary or progressive element in Islam, including in the Mojahedin's reading of Islam?

The short answer is no. Progressive ideas cannot be derived from dogmas that claim divine origin, and which include so many obviously reactionary and oppressive ideas. The struggle of European liberals and revolutionaries from the Middle Ages onwards against clericalism and the Christian religion were necessary to remove religion and the invocation of supernatural authority from political life, and the same applies to Islam, Judaism or Hinduism. Recent relativism and accommodationist interpretations of different religions have confused this question, but events in Iran and Afghanistan should have underlined the point rather firmly. During the revolutionary upheaval in Iran, and immediately afterwards, considerable attention was paid to the writings of Ali Shariati, whom the Mojahedin claim as an intellectual source. A reading of his texts suggests, however, that he was a superficial and derivative thinker, without any substantial intellectual content, and, in any comparative perspective, a mediocre figure.

This does not mean that believers in the great religions cannot play positive political roles, in support of social reform, equality and national independence. All religions contain some ideas that are in favour of progressive ideals, and the interpretations made by radical Catholics in Latin America show how such a reconciliation can take place. But here, as in those countries where revolutionary states invoke Islam in support of their policies, there is no claim that progressive ideas must in the end come from the divine. Rather, we are talking of secular and rational ideas to which, for their own reasons, people of a religious and theological orientation wish to adhere. Where religion has perhaps the greatest appeal is in the sphere of ethics and the major existential issues confronting each individual, not least death. It hardly needs underlining that socialism, for all its vision of an alternative order, has not provided widely acceptable answers on these questions. Here the clarity and certainty of religious solutions are, for many people, compelling, or at least sufficiently consoling, and this will remain so for a long time to

come. This is quite different, however, from admitting that religion can guide political action or political programmes.

Any attempt actually to base a progressive politics on Islam is doomed to failure. First of all, it denies rational discussion and popular authority, because authority is held to come from God. Secondly, it sanctions a series of reactionary policies, not least those on women. Thirdly, it inevitably introduces an atmosphere of dogmatism and intolerance, as the history and degeneration of the Mojahedin-i Khalq well illustrate. They played an important, heroic, role in the struggle against the Shah, and fought bravely after the 1981 break with the Khomeini regime. But their organization is marked by dogmatic, undemocratic and authoritarian patterns of thought and practice, which condemn it to failure. I twice visited Masud Rajavi during his time in France, and an interview I did with him, including some discussion of Islam and politics, was published in *MERIP Reports* in 1982. But in the middle of 1986 my contacts with the organization ended abruptly, after I had made some criticisms in the aftermath of Rajavi's departure from France to Iraq. They resorted to the usual accusations, saying that I was an 'agent'; it was not the first time this had been said to me, particularly by Iranians, nor will it be the last. I wrote a letter to Rajavi and the Mojahedin leadership laying out my reasons for criticizing them: the cult of the personality around Rajavi and his wife; the unnecessary, sectarian, destruction of the National Resistance Council which had been, at the beginning, a broad alliance of different anti-Khomeini forces; the exaggeration, irresponsible to the point of being criminal in my view, of the immediate revolutionary potential in Iran; the dangers of their dependent alliance with Iraq; and the consequences of their inability to evaluate the situations in which they found themselves—in both Iran in 1981 and France in 1986, they left things too late and were caught off balance by the initiatives of their opponents. I never received acknowledgement or reply from the Mojahedin to that letter.

Why do you think that the Iranian Left suffered such a humiliating defeat, particularly during and after 1983?

There is no easy answer to that question, and there were never any easy answers in the past, either in the face of the Pahlavi dictatorship or under the Khomeini regime. Those who say the Left could have emerged victorious, if only it had done this or that, are simplifying the situation.

Two contextual factors are important. I have already referred to the socio-economic character of Iran and the strength of pre-capitalist social forces, with a coherent ideology, who were able to mobilize a mass of the urban population. The Left faced important competition, of a kind not present in China, or Vietnam, or Nicaragua. But there is also the political fact that the great advances of the Left had been defeated much earlier, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In my view, the great turning point in modern Iranian history, as far as the Left is concerned, was not 1979, or 1963, or 1953, but 1946; from that moment on, with the retreat of Soviet forces and the crushing of the Kurdish and Azerbaijani republics, the ability of the Left to challenge the regime and mobilize

the population has receded. The expulsion of the Tudeh ministers from the government in 1946 and the pushing of the party onto the defensive was as important a moment for the Left in Iran as was the parallel assault on Communists in France and Italy. The opportunities opened up by the weakening of state power during World War Two were then lost. After 1953, when there was no mass resistance to the coup, the Left's appeal and organizational strength declined even further; it remained strong among the intelligentsia but not in the population as a whole, and it had no access to the new urban population that grew in the 1960s and 1970s. It would be simplistic to explain Khomeini's appeal in terms of his operating in a political vacuum, but nonetheless the previous destruction of the Communist and nationalist forces was an important precondition. To these two factors we must add a third, namely the USSR, which has restrained the Iranian Left in two ways. On the one hand, it has represented a dictatorial and dogmatic model of socialism which has been adopted by much of the Left in Iran; partly, of course, this is a matter of indigenous patterns of thought and authority, but the character of the Tudeh and its offshoots has also been strongly shaped by Stalinism. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership has feared that support for the Iranian revolutionary movement might lead to a confrontation with Britain and the USA. This latter point was evident in the timid Soviet policies of 1946 and 1953, and earlier in the withdrawal from the Gilan revolutionaries in 1921. At any event, the Left has been held back and deformed by its association with the USSR, and has proved unable to develop a measured, independent and critical assessment of the Soviet Union.

When we come to the revolution, it is certainly possible to say that the Left miscalculated about Khomeini—some about the direction of his policies, the full regressive import of which they underestimated, and others about his ability to consolidate state power and destroy other forces, including the Left. The result was that during the period 1979 to 1983 the regime was able to divide the Left, picking off one group after another, in an atomized fashion. My own opinions were formed during the visit I made to Iran in the summer of 1979. I was able to see a number of officials in the regime and to discuss policy with them. But the repressive potential of the revolution had already become clear; in the attacks on women and Bahai, and in the creeping press censorship. By chance, I was in the offices of *Ayandegan* when the revolutionary guards came to close it down. I spoke with one guard and he told me the paper was 'shit' (*gob*). When I told him that two million people read it, he replied that the two million people were *gob* too. I participated in the mass demonstration by supporters of *Ayandegan* against censorship, and visited the offices of the Fedayin and Mojahedin days before they were closed. It was at that time too that the first offensives against the Kurds were launched in the west. On leaving Iran, I realized that this had been a turning point in the revolution and that the direction and repressive capacity of the regime were to be condemned. In the *New Statesman* I published an extended report, under the title 'Islam with a Fascist Face'. The pro-Soviet Iranian Left, and its European allies, condemned me for taking this position, and I was accused of being an agent of this and that, in the normal way. But it remains my view that from the beginning, the Left should have formed a united

front against the regime and denounced it on the whole range of its policies—on press freedom, on women, on the nationalities, on workers' rights and so forth. What one heard in 1979 and for some time afterwards were the usual trite arguments that issues such as women or the nationalities were secondary, deviations from the main tasks. Of course, once the occupation of the US embassy had taken place in November 1979, this 'anti-imperialist' frenzy, with much demagoguery added, would overwhelm the Left in intensified form. Support for the seizure of the US hostages, what I have termed 'the anti-imperialism of fools', was to provide the ideal cover for Khomeini's consolidation of clerical dictatorship.

The events of 1979 bring out what was, in my view, the central avoidable error of most of the Iranian Left—its catastrophic stand on 'liberalism'. In essence, the Left allied with Khomeini to break 'liberalism'—that is, those moderate democratic forces that opposed the Shah but were against the clerical dictatorship. This was a political error, since Khomeini destroyed the Left as he had earlier attacked the liberals, but it also reflected a theoretical mistake about the character of social and ideological forces in Iran. For in any historical materialist perspective, the 'liberals' reflected a more progressive position than the reactionary ideas and policies of Khomeini. This was evident enough from the history of Europe, where the liberal bourgeoisie played an important role in fighting feudalism and its associated ideas. The Left's mistake was not to see this; it was an error comparable to that of the German Communists who, in the early 1930s, allied with the fascists to destroy the social-democrats. In 1981 and 1983 when the various left groups turned against Khomeini, one was tempted to ask them where they had been when the demonstrations in support of *Ayandegan* had taken place.

To have come out in a firm and united way against the clerical forces and in alliance with the 'liberals' would have required courage and coordination. This also poses the deeper question of what, had it been more aware of the direction of the revolution, the Left could and should have done during the revolutionary period itself. For, by conceding leadership to Khomeini, it enabled him to mobilize the support that was later used against the Left. The least the Left could have done would have been to maintain a critical, independent, stance vis-à-vis the Khomeini forces, while participating in the campaign against the Shah. Even in the pre-revolutionary period there were clear signs of the repressive potential of the Islamic movement—in its views on women and on the Bahai. The best outcome would, undoubtedly, have been a protracted Bakhtiar transition, during which the Shah's state would have been dismantled and the dynamic of the reactionary Islamic forces broken. But whatever the Left had done, I doubt whether this would have stemmed the tide. I say this not to see history as predetermined, which often it is not, but to underline once again that the Left faced no easy choices. This is, of course, not the same as saying that all the choices Left groups did make were either inevitable or justified. The illusions and the tolerance of the Khomeini regime were, in the end, self-defeating, and have made much more difficult the now-essential task of building a broad, united and pluralistic opposition front.