Chapter 6

The Islamic Republic

Revolutions invariably produce stronger states.
De Tocqueville

We need to strengthen our state. Only Marxists want the state to wither away.
Hojjat al-Islam Rafsanjani

The Islamic Revolution (1977–79)

There has been much speculation on whether the revolution could have been prevented if only this or that had been done: if the shah had been more resolute in crushing or reconciling the opposition; if he had not been suffering from cancer; if his forceful advisors had still been alive; if he had spent less on high-tech weaponry and more on crowd control gear; if his generals had shown a semblance of esprit de corps; if human rights organizations had not pestered him; if the CIA had continued to monitor the country closely after the 1950s; if the White House had ignored self-censoring diplomats and heeded the dire warning of skeptic academics; and if, in the final stages, Washington had been more consistent either in fully supporting him or in trying to reach out to Khomeini. Immediately after the debacle, Washington grappled with the question “Who lost Iran?” Some blamed President Carter, some the CIA, some the shah, some his generals.¹ Such speculation, however, is as meaningless as whether the Titanic would have sunk if the deckchairs had been arranged differently.

The revolution erupted not because of this or that last-minute political mistake. It erupted like a volcano because of the overwhelming pressures that had built up over the decades deep in the bowels of Iranian society. By 1977, the shah was sitting on such a volcano, having alienated almost every sector of society. He began his autocratic rule adamantly opposed by the intelligentsia and the urban working class. This opposition intensified over the years. In an age of republicanism, he flaunted monarchism, shahism,
and Pahlavism. In an age of nationalism and anti-imperialism, he came to power as a direct result of the CIA–MI6 overthrow of Mossadeq – the idol of Iranian nationalism. In an age of neutralism, he mocked non-alignment and Third Worldism. Instead he appointed himself America’s policeman in the Persian Gulf, and openly sided with the USA on such sensitive issues as Palestine and Vietnam. And in an age of democracy, he waxed eloquent on the virtues of order, discipline, guidance, kingship, and his personal communication with God.

He not only intensified existing animosities but also created new ones. His White Revolution wiped out in one stroke the class that in the past had provided the key support for the monarchy in general and the Pahlavi regime in particular: the landed class of tribal chiefs and rural notables. His failure to follow up the White Revolution with needed rural services left the new class of medium-sized landowners high and dry. Consequently, the one class that should have supported the regime in its days of trouble stood on the sidelines watching the grand debacle. The failure to improve living conditions in the countryside – together with the rapid population growth – led to mass migration of landless peasants into the cities. This created large armies of shantytown poor – the battering rams for the forthcoming revolution. What is more, many saw the formation of the Resurgence Party in 1975 as an open declaration of war on the traditional middle class – especially on the bazaars and their closely allied clergy. It pushed even the quietist and apolitical clergy into the arms of the most vocal and active opponent – namely Khomeini. While alienating much of the country, the shah felt confident that his ever-expanding state gave him absolute control over society. This impression was as deceptive as the formidable-looking dams he took pride in building. They looked impressive – solid, modern, and indestructible. In fact, they were inefficient, wasteful, clogged with sediment, and easily breached. Even the state with its vast army of government personnel proved unreliable in the final analysis. The civil servants, like the rest of the country, joined the revolution by going on strike. They knew that the shah, the Pahlavis, and the whole institution of monarchy could be relegated to the dustbin of history without undermining the actual state. They saw the shah as an entirely separate entity from the state. They acted not as cogs in the state machinery but as members of society – indeed as citizens with grievances similar to those voiced by the rest of the salaried middle class.

These grievances were summed up in 1976 – on the half-century anniversary of the Pahlavi dynasty – by an exiled opposition paper published in Paris. An article entitled “Fifty Years of Treason” written by Abul-Hassan
Bani-Sadr, the future president of the Islamic Republic, it indicted the regime on fifty separate counts of political, economic, cultural, and social wrongdoings. These included: the *coup d'état* of 1921 as well as that of 1953; trampling the fundamental laws and making a mockery of the Constitutional Revolution; granting capitulations reminiscent of nineteenth-century colonialism; forming military alliances with the West; murdering opponents and shooting down unarmed protestors, especially in June 1963; purging patriotic officers from the armed forces; opening up the economy – especially the agricultural market – to foreign agrobusinesses; establishing a one-party state with a cult of personality; highjacking religion and taking over religious institutions; undermining national identity by spreading “cultural imperialism”; cultivating “fascism” by propagating shah-worship, racism, Aryanism, and anti-Arabism; and, most recently, establishing a one-party state with the intention of totally dominating society. “These fifty years,” the article exclaimed, “contain fifty counts of treason.”

These grievances began to be aired in 1977 – as soon as the shah relaxed his more stringent police controls. He did so in part because Jimmy Carter in his presidential campaign had raised the issue of human rights across the world, in Iran as well as in the Soviet Union; in part because mainstream newspapers such as the London *Sunday Times* had run exposés on torture, arbitrary arrests, and mass imprisonments in Iran; but in most part because of pressure from human rights organizations, especially the highly reputable International Commission of Jurists. Anxious to cast off the label of “one of the worst violators of human rights in the world” – as Amnesty International had described him – the shah promised the International Commission of Jurists that the Red Cross would have access to prisons; that foreign lawyers would be able to monitor trials; that less dangerous political prisoners would be amnestied; and, most important of all, that civilians would be tried in open civilian courts with attorneys of their own choosing. These concessions – however modest – chiseled cracks in the façade of this formidable-looking regime. The shah granted these concessions probably because he was confident he could weather the storm. In any case, he had deluded himself into thinking that he enjoyed overwhelming public support. He boasted privately to the representative of the International Commission of Jurists that the only people who opposed him were the “nihilists.”

The slight opening gave the opposition the space to air its voice. In the autumn of 1977, a stream of middle-class organizations formed of lawyers, judges, intellectuals, academics, and journalists, as well as seminary
students, bazaar merchants, and former political leaders, appeared or reappeared, published manifestos and newsletters, and openly denounced the Resurgence Party. This stirring of unrest culminated in October with ten poetry-reading evenings near the Industrial University in Tehran, organized jointly by the recently revived Writers Association and the German-government funded Goethe House. The writers – all well-known dissidents – criticized the regime, and, on the final evening, led the overflowing audience into the streets where they clashed with the police. It was rumored that one student was killed, seventy were injured, and more than one hundred were arrested. These protests persisted in the following months, especially on December 7 – the unofficial student day. Those arrested in these protests were sent to civilian courts where they were either released or given light sentences. This sent a clear message to others – including seminary students in Qom.

The situation worsened in January 1978 when the government-controlled paper Ettela‘at dropped an unexpected bombshell. It ran an editorial denouncing Khomeini in particular and the clergy in general as “black reactionaries” in cahoots with feudalism, imperialism, and, of course, communism. It also claimed that Khomeini had led a licentious life in his youth, indulging in wine and mystical poetry, and that he was not really an Iranian – his grandfather had lived in Kashmir and his relatives used the surname Hendi (Indian). The only explanation one can give for this editorial is that the regime was puffed up with its own power. One should never underestimate the role of stupidity in history. On the following two days, seminar students in Qom took to the streets, persuading local bazaars to close down, seeking the support of senior clerics – especially Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari – and eventually marching to the police station where they clashed with the authorities. The regime estimated that the “tragedy” took two lives. The opposition estimated that the “massacre” killed 70 and wounded 500. In this, as in all clashes during the course of the next thirteen months, casualty estimates differed greatly. In the aftermath of the clash, the regime claimed that the seminary students had been protesting the anniversary of Reza Shah’s unveiling of women. In fact, petitions drawn up by seminaries did not mention any such anniversary. Instead, they demanded apologies for the editorial; release of political prisoners; the return of Khomeini; reopening of his Fayzieh seminary; the cessation of physical attacks on university students in Tehran; freedom of expression, especially for the press; independence for the judiciary; the breaking of ties with imperial powers; support for agriculture; and the immediate dissolution of the Resurgence Party. These remained their main demands
throughout 1978. Immediately after the Qom incident, Shariatmadari asked the nation to observe the fortieth day after the deaths by staying away from work and attending mosque services.

The Qom incident triggered a cycle of three major forty-day crises – each more serious than the previous one. The first – in mid-February – led to violent clashes in many cities, especially Tabriz, Shariatmadari’s hometown. The regime rushed in tanks and helicopter gunships to regain control of the city. The second – in late March – caused considerable property damage in Yazd and Isfahan. The shah had to cancel a foreign trip and take personal control of the anti-riot police. The third – in May – shook twenty-four towns. In Qom, the police violated the sanctity of Shariatmadari’s home and killed two seminary students who had taken sanctuary there. The authorities claimed that these forty-day demonstrations had left 22 dead; the opposition put the figure at 250.

Tensions were further heightened by two additional and separate incidents of bloodshed. On August 19 – the anniversary of the 1953 coup – a large cinema in the working-class district of Abadan went up in flames, incinerating more than 400 women and children. The public automatically blamed the local police chief, who, in his previous assignment, had ordered the January shooting in Qom. After a mass burial outside the city, some 10,000 relatives and friends marched into Abadan shouting “Burn the shah, End the Pahlavis.” The Washington Post reporter wrote that the marchers had one clear message: “The shah must go.” The reporter for the Financial Times was surprised that so many, even those with vested interests in the regime, suspected that SAVAK had set the fire. Decades of distrust had taken their toll.

The second bloodletting came on September 8 – immediately after the shah had declared martial law. He had also banned all street meetings, ordered the arrest of opposition leaders, and named a hawkish general to be military governor of Tehran. Commandoes surrounded a crowd in Jaleh Square in downtown Tehran, ordered them to disband, and, when they refused to do so, shot indiscriminately. September 8 became known as Black Friday – reminiscent of Bloody Sunday in the Russian Revolution of 1905–06. European journalists reported that Jaleh Square resembled “a firing squad,” and that the military left behind “carnage.” Its main casualty, however, was a feasible possibility of compromise. A British observer noted that the gulf between shah and public was now unbridgeable – both because of Black Friday and because of the Abadan fire. The French philosopher Michel Foucault, who had rushed to cover the revolution for an Italian newspaper, claimed that some 4,000 had been shot in Jaleh Square. In fact, the Martyrs Foundation – which compensates families
6 The statue of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi lies on the ground near Khomeini’s HQ during the revolution. Tehran, February 1979.

7 Woman passing soldiers during the revolution. Tehran, 1978.
of victims – later compiled the names of 84 killed throughout the city on that day.\textsuperscript{13} In the following weeks, strikes spread from colleges and high schools to the oil industry, bazaars, state and private factories, banks, railways, port facilities, and government offices. The whole country, including the Plan and Budget Organization, the crème de la crème of the central government, had gone on strike.

The opposition showed more of its clout on December 11, 1978, during Ashura, the climactic day of Muharram, when its representatives in Tehran – speaking on behalf of Khomeini – reached an understanding with the government. The government agreed to keep the military out of sight and confined mostly to the northern wealthy parts of the city. The opposition agreed to march along prescribed routes and not raise slogans directly attacking the person of the shah. On the climactic day, four orderly processions converged on the expansive Shahyad Square in western Tehran. Foreign correspondents estimated the crowd to be in excess of two million. The rally ratified by acclamation resolutions calling for the establishment of an Islamic Republic, the return of Khomeini, the expulsion of the imperial powers, and the implementation of social justice for the “deprived masses.”\textsuperscript{14} In this as in all these demonstrations, the term \textit{velayat-e faqeh} was intentionally avoided. The \textit{New York Times} wrote that the message was loud and clear: “The government was powerless to preserve law and order on its own. It could do so only by standing aside and allowing the religious leaders to take charge. In a way, the opposition has demonstrated that there already is an alternative government.”\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the \textit{Christian Science Monitor} reported that a “giant wave of humanity swept through the capital declaring louder than any bullet or bomb could the clear message: ‘The Shah Must Go.’”\textsuperscript{16} Many treated the rally as a de facto referendum.

Khomeini returned from exile on February 1 – two weeks after the shah had left the country. The crowds that greeted Khomeini totaled more than three million, forcing him to take a helicopter from the airport to the Behest-e Zahra cemetery where he paid respects to the “tens of thousands martyred for the revolution.” The new regime soon set the official figure at 60,000. The true figure was probably fewer than 3,000.\textsuperscript{17} The Martyrs Foundation later commissioned – but did not publish – a study of those killed in the course of the whole revolutionary movement, beginning in June 1963. According to these figures, 2,781 demonstrators were killed in the fourteen months from October 1977 to February 1979. Most of the victims were in the capital – especially in the southern working-class districts of Tehran.\textsuperscript{18} The \textit{coup de grâce} for the regime came on February 9–11, when
cadets and technicians, supported by Fedayin and Mojahedin, took on the Imperial Guards in the main air-force base near Jaleh Square. The chiefs of staff, however, declared neutrality and confined their troops to their barracks. *Le Monde* reported that the area around Jaleh Square resembled the Paris Commune, especially when people broke into armories and distributed weapons. The *New York Times* reported that “for the first time since the political crisis started more than a year ago, thousands of civilians appeared in the streets with machine guns and other weapons.”

Similarly, a Tehran paper reported that “guns were distributed to thousands of people, from ten-year-old children to seventy-year-old pensioners.”

The final scene in the drama came on the afternoon of February 11, when Tehran Radio made the historic statement: “This is the voice of Iran, the voice of true Iran, the voice of the Islamic Revolution.” Two days of street fighting had completed the destruction of the 53-year-old dynasty and the 2,500-year-old monarchy. Of the three pillars the Pahlavis had built to bolster their state, the military had been immobilized, the bureaucracy had joined the revolution, and court patronage had become a huge embarrassment. The voice of the people had proved mightier than the Pahlavi monarchy.

THE ISLAMIC CONSTITUTION (1979)

The main task at hand after the revolution was the drafting of a new constitution to replace the 1906 fundamental laws. This prompted a somewhat uneven struggle between, on the one hand, Khomeini and his disciples, determined to institutionalize their concept of *velayat-e faqeh*, and, on the other hand, Mehdi Bazargan, the official prime minister, and his liberal lay Muslim supporters, eager to draw up a constitution modeled on Charles de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic. They envisaged a republic that would be Islamic in name but democratic in content. This conflict also indicated the existence of a dual government. On one side was the Provisional Government headed by Bazargan and filled by fellow veterans from Mossadeq’s nationalist movement. Some cabinet ministers were members of Bazargan’s Liberation Movement; others came from the more secular National Front. Khomeini had set up this Provisional Government to reassure the government bureaucracy – the ministries as well as the armed forces. He wanted to remove the shah, not dismantle the whole state. On the other side was the far more formidable shadow clerical government. In the last days of the revolution, Khomeini set up in Tehran a Revolutionary Council and a Central Komiteh (Committee). The former acted as a watchdog on the Provisional Government. The latter brought under its wing the
local komitehs and their *pasdars* (guards) that had sprung up in the many mosques scattered throughout the country. It also purged from these units clerics closely associated with other religious leaders – especially Shariatmadari. Immediately after the fall of the shah, Khomeini established in Tehran a Revolutionary Tribunal to oversee the ad hoc courts that had appeared throughout the country; and in Qom a Central Mosque Office whose task was to appoint imam jum’ehs to provincial capitals. For the first time, a central clerical institution took control over provincial imam jum’ehs. In other words, the shadow state dwarfed the official one. Bazargan complained: “In theory, the government is in charge; but, in reality, it is Khomeini who is in charge – he with his Revolutionary Council, his revolutionary Komitehs, and his relationship with the masses.”22 “They put a knife in my hands,” he added, “but it’s a knife with only a handle. Others are holding the blade.”

Bazargan’s first brush with Khomeini came as early as March when the country prepared to vote either yes or no in a referendum on instituting an Islamic Republic. Bazargan wanted to give the public the third choice of a Democratic Islamic Republic. Khomeini refused with the argument: “What the nation needs is an Islamic Republic – not a Democratic Republic nor a Democratic Islamic Republic. Don’t use the Western term ‘democratic.’ Those who call for such a thing don’t know anything about Islam.”23 He later added: “Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means everything. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect.”24 The referendum, held on April 1, produced 99 percent yes votes for the Islamic Republic. Twenty million – out of an electorate of twenty-one million – participated. This laid the ground for elections to a 73-man constituent body with the newly coined name of *Majles-e Khebregan* (Assembly of Experts) – a term with religious connotations. In August, the country held elections for these delegates. All candidates were closely vetted by the Central Komiteh, the Central Mosque Office, and the newly formed Society for the Militant Clergy of Tehran (*Jam’eh-e Rouhaniyan-e Mobarez-e Tehran*). Not surprisingly, the elections produced landslide victories for Khomeini’s disciples. The winners included fifteen ayatollahs, forty hojjat al-islams, and eleven laymen closely associated with Khomeini. The Assembly of Experts set to work drafting the Islamic Constitution.

The final product was a hybrid – albeit weighted heavily in favor of one – between Khomeini’s *velayat-e faqeh* and Bazargan’s French Republic; between divine rights and the rights of man; between theocracy and democracy; between *vox dei* and *vox populi*; and between clerical authority
and popular sovereignty. The document contained 175 clauses – 40 amendments were added upon Khomeini’s death. The document was to remain in force until the return of the Mahdi. The preamble affirmed faith in God, Divine Justice, the Koran, Judgment Day, the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams, the return of the Hidden Mahdi, and, most pertinent of all, Khomeini’s concept of *velayat-e faqeh*. It reaffirmed opposition to all forms of authoritarianism, colonialism, and imperialism. The introductory clauses bestowed on Khomeini such titles as Supreme Faqeh, Supreme Leader, Guide of the Revolution, Founder of the Islamic Republic, Inspirer of the Mostazafen, and, most potent of all, Imam of the Muslim Umma – Shi’is had never before bestowed on a living person this sacred title with its connotations of Infallibility. Khomeini was declared Supreme Leader for life. It was stipulated that upon his death the Assembly of Experts could either replace him with one paramount religious figure, or, if no such person emerged, with a Council of Leadership formed of three or five faqehs. It was also stipulated that they could dismiss them if they were deemed incapable of carrying out their duties. The constitution retained the national tricolor, henceforth incorporating the inscription “God is Great.”

The constitution endowed the Supreme Leader with wide-ranging authority. He could “determine the interests of Islam,” “set general guidelines for the Islamic Republic,” “supervise policy implementation,” and “mediate between the executive, legislative, and judiciary.” He could grant amnesty and dismiss presidents as well as vet candidates for that office. As commander-in-chief, he could declare war and peace, mobilize the armed forces, appoint their commanders, and convene a national security council. Moreover, he could appoint an impressive array of high officials outside the formal state structure, including the director of the national radio/television network, the supervisor of the imam jum’eh office, the heads of the new clerical institutions, especially the Mostazafen Foundation which had replaced the Pahlavi Foundation, and through it the editors of the country’s two leading newspapers – *Ettela’at* and *Kayhan*. Furthermore, he could appoint the chief justice as well as lower court judges, the state prosecutor, and, most important of all, six clerics to a twelve-man Guardian Council. This Guardian Council could veto bills passed by the legislature if it deemed them contrary to the spirit of either the constitution or the shari’a. It also had the power to vet candidates running for public office – including the Majles. A later amendment gave the Supreme Leader the additional power to appoint an Expediency Council to mediate differences between the Majles and the Guardian Council.

Khomeini had obtained constitutional powers unimagined by shahs. The revolution of 1906 had produced a constitutional monarchy; that of 1979
produced power worthy of Il Duce. As one of Khomeini’s leading disciples declared, if he had to choose between democracy and *velayat-e faqeh*, he would not hesitate because the latter represented the voice of God. Khomeini argued that the constitution in no way contradicted democracy because the “people love the clergy, have faith in the clergy, and want to be guided by the clergy.” “It is right,” he added, “that the supreme religious authority should oversee the work of the president and other state officials, to make sure that they don’t make mistakes or go against the law and the Koran.” A few years later, Khomeini explained that Islamic government – being a “divine entity given by God to the Prophet” – could suspend any laws on the ground of *maslahat* (protecting the public interest) – a Sunni concept which in the past had been rejected by Shi’is. “The government of Islam,” he argued, “is a primary rule having precedence over secondary

![Chart of the Islamic Constitution](image-url)
rulings such as praying, fasting, and performing the hajj. To preserve Islam, the government can suspend any or all secondary rulings.” 28 In enumerating the powers of the Supreme Leader, the constitution added: “The Supreme Leader is equal in the eyes of the law with all other members of society.”

The constitution, however, did give some important concessions to democracy. The general electorate – defined as all adults including women – was given the authority to choose through secret and direct balloting the president, the Majles, the provincial and local councils as well as the Assembly of Experts. The voting age was initially put at sixteen years, later lowered to fifteen, and then raised back to sixteen in 2005. The president, elected every four years and limited to two terms, was defined as the “chief executive,” and the “highest official authority after the Supreme Leader.” He presided over the cabinet, and appointed its ministers as well as all ambassadors, governors, mayors, and directors of the National Bank, the National Iranian Oil Company, and the Plan and Budget Organization. He was responsible for the annual budget and the implementation of external as well as internal policies. He – it was presumed the president would be a male – had to be a Shi’i “faithful to the principles of the Islamic Revolution.”

The Majles, also elected every four years, was described as “representing the nation.” It had the authority to investigate all affairs of state and complaints against the executive and judiciary; approve the president’s choice of ministers and to withdraw this approval at any time; question the president and cabinet ministers; endorse all budgets, loans and international treaties; approve the employment of foreign advisors; hold closed meetings, debate any issue, provide members with immunity, and regulate its own internal workings; and determine whether a specific declaration of martial law was justified. It could – with a two-thirds majority – call for a referendum to amend the constitution. It could also choose the other six members of the Guardian Council from a list drawn up by the judiciary. The Majles was to have 270 representatives with the stipulation that the national census, held every ten years, could increase the overall number. Separate seats were allocated to the officially recognized religious minorities: the Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.

Local councils – on provincial as well as town, district, and village levels – were to assist governors and mayors in administering their regions. The councils were named *shouras* – a radical-sounding term associated with 1905–06 revolutions in both Iran and Russia. In fact, demonstrations organized by the Mojahedin and Fedayin pressured the Assembly of Experts to incorporate them into the constitution. Finally, all citizens, irrespective of
race, ethnicity, creed, and gender, were guaranteed basic human and civil liberties: the rights of press freedom, expression, worship, organization, petition, and demonstration; equal treatment before the law; the right of appeal; and the freedom from arbitrary arrest, torture, police surveillance, and even wiretapping. The accused enjoyed habeas corpus and had to be brought before civilian courts within twenty-four hours. The law “deemed them innocent until proven guilty beyond any doubt in a proper court of law.”

The presence of these democratic clauses requires some explanation. The revolution had been carried out not only under the banner of Islam, but also in response to demands for “liberty, equality, and social justice.” The country had a long history of popular struggles reaching back to the Constitutional Revolution. The Pahlavi regime had been taken to task for trampling on civil liberties and human rights. Secular groups – especially lawyers and human rights organizations – had played their part in the revolution. And, most important of all, the revolution itself had been carried out through popular participation from below – through mass meetings, general strikes, and street protests. Die-hard fundamentalists complained that these democratic concessions went too far. They privately consoled themselves with the notion that the Islamic Republic was merely a transitional stage on the way to the eventual full Imamate.

The constitution also incorporated many populist promises. It promised citizens pensions, unemployment benefits, disability pay, decent housing, medical care, and free secondary as well as primary education. It promised to encourage home ownership; eliminate poverty, unemployment, vice, usury, hoarding, private monopolies, and inequality – including between men and women; make the country self-sufficient both agriculturally and industrially; command the good and forbid the bad; and help the “mostazafen of the world struggle against their mostakaben (oppressors).” It categorized the national economy into public and private sectors, allocating large industries to the former but agriculture, light industry, and most services to the latter. Private property was fully respected “provided it was legitimate.” Despite generous guarantees to individual and social rights, the constitution included ominous Catch-22s: “All laws and regulations must conform to the principles of Islam”; “The Guardian Council has the authority to determine these principles”; and “All legislation must be sent to the Guardian Council for detailed examination. The Guardian Council must ensure that the contents of the legislation do not contravene Islamic precepts and the principles of the Constitution.”

The complete revamping of Bazargan’s preliminary draft caused consternation not only with secular groups but also with the Provisional
Government and Shariatmadari who had always held strong reservations about Khomeini’s notion of velayat-e faqeh. Bazargan and seven members of the Provisional Government sent a petition to Khomeini pleading with him to dissolve the Assembly of Experts on the grounds that the proposed constitution violated popular sovereignty, lacked needed consensus, endangered the nation with akhundism (clericalism), elevated the ulama into a “ruling class,” and undermined religion since future generations would blame all shortcomings on Islam. Complaining that the actions of the Assembly of Experts constituted “a revolution against the revolution,” they threatened to go to the public with their own original version of the constitution. It is quite possible that if the country had been given such a choice it would have preferred Bazargan’s version. One of Khomeini’s closest disciples later claimed that Bazargan had been “plotting” to eliminate the Assembly of Experts and thus undo the whole Islamic Revolution.

It was at this critical moment that President Carter permitted the shah’s entry to the USA for cancer treatment. With or without Khomeini’s knowledge, this prompted 400 university students – later named Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line – to climb over the walls of the US embassy and thereby begin what became the famous 444-day hostage crisis. The students were convinced that the CIA was using the embassy as its headquarters and planning a repeat performance of the 1953 coup. The ghosts of 1953 continued to haunt Iran. As soon as Bazargan realized that Khomeini would not order the pasdars to release the hostages, he handed in his resignation. For the outside world, the hostage affair was an international crisis par excellence. For Iran, it was predominantly an internal struggle over the constitution. As Khomeini’s disciples readily admitted, Bazargan and the “liberals” had to go “because they had strayed from the Imam’s line.” The hostage-takers hailed their embassy takeover as the Second Islamic Revolution.

It was under cover of this new crisis that Khomeini submitted the constitution to a referendum. He held the referendum on December 2 – the day after Ashura. He declared that those abstaining or voting no would be abetting the Americans as well as desecrating the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution. He equated the ulama with Islam, and those opposing the constitution, especially lay “intellectuals,” with “satan” and “imperialism.” He also warned that any sign of disunity would tempt America to attack Iran. Outmaneuvered, Bazargan asked his supporters to vote yes on the ground that the alternative could well be “anarchy.” But other secular groups, notably the Mojahedin, Fedayin, and the National Front, refused to participate. The result was a foregone conclusion: 99 percent voted yes. The
turnout, however, was noticeably less than in the previous referendum – especially in the Sunni regions of Kurdistan and Baluchestan as well as in Shariatmadari’s home province, Azerbaijan. In the previous referendum, twenty million had voted. This time, only sixteen million did so. In other words, nearly 17 percent did not support the constitution. The ulama got their theocratic constitution, but at the cost of eroding the republic’s broad base.

Consolidation (1980–89)

The Islamic Republic survived despite the conventional wisdom that its demise was imminent as well as inevitable. At the outset, few envisaged its survival. After all, history had not produced many fully fledged theocracies – either inside or outside the Middle East. Many lay people – royalists, leftists, secular nationalists, and members of the intelligentsia – tended to look down upon the clergy as out of place in the contemporary world. They certainly did not consider them capable of running a modern state. What is more, political émigrés throughout history have had the tendency – first noted by the “European social philosopher of the nineteenth century” – to see the smallest sign of discontent, such as a strike, a protest, or a disgruntled voice, as indisputable evidence of the coming deluge. They gave the regime a few months – at most, a few years.

The new state, however, not only survived but consolidated its power. It ceased to be an isolated and autonomous entity hovering over society – as it had been under the Pahlavis. Instead it became an arena in which various interest groups competed and jockeyed for influence. It became part and parcel of the larger society. It took over the previous state intact, merely purging the top echelons, and then gradually but steadily expanded its ranks. It continued the five-year plans with their ambitious projects – all except initially the Bushire nuclear plant. The central bureaucracy grew from twenty ministries with 304,000 civil servants in 1979 to twenty-six ministries with 850,000 civil servants in 1982. It further grew to more than a million civil servants in 2004. The new ministries included intelligence, revolutionary guards, heavy industries, higher education, reconstruction crusade, and Islamic guidance. In 1979, Bazargan had called upon the revolution to liberate the country from the shackles of bureaucracy, which he identified as the main legacy of the Pahlavi era. The Islamic Revolution, however, like others, expanded the bureaucracy. As in the Pahlavi decades, the expansion was made possible by the steady inflow of oil revenues, which, despite fluctuations, brought an average of $15 billion a year throughout the 1980s and as much as $30 billion a year in the early 2000s.
8 Stamps honouring the forerunners of the Islamic Revolution. They depict (from left to right) Fazlollah Nuri, Ayatollah Modarres, Kuchek Khan, and Navab Safavi.
The Iran–Iraq War gave the state an immediate impetus to expand. Initiated by Saddam Hussein – most probably to regain control over the crucial Shatt al-Arab waterway – the war lasted eight full years. Iran pushed Iraq out in May 1983, then advanced into enemy territory with the slogans “War, War Until Victory,” and “The Road to Jerusalem Goes Through Baghdad.” Iran resorted to trench warfare and the strategy of full mobilization – reminiscent of World War I. At the time, it was thought that Iran suffered more than a million dead. But government spokesmen later gave the figure of 160,000
8.4 Stamps issued by the Bazargan government for al-e Ahmad, Shariati, Mossadeq, and Dehkhoda.
8.5 Anniversary stamps for the Islamic Revolution issued in the course of the 1980s.
8.5 (cont.)
killed in battle. Others add that another 30,000 died later from war-related wounds, that 16,000 civilians were killed in the bombing of cities, and that more than 39,000 suffered permanent injuries – many of them from gas and chemical attacks in the trenches. It is also estimated that another 23,000 suffered PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder, known in World War I as “shell shock.” Not surprisingly, the war had long-lasting consequences.

In the course of the war, the militias were transformed into a fully fledged military force named the Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Engelabi (Army of Revolutionary Guards). With their own ministry, the Revolutionary Guards numbered as many as 120,000 men and contained their own small naval and air units. They also controlled some 200,000 young and old volunteers in a support force known as the Basej-e Mostazafen (Mobilization of the Oppressed). The new regime retained much of the previous military as its main professional fighting force, only purging the higher echelons. It also instituted a religious variant of the communist commissar system, using some 270 chaplains to keep watch on key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1977–78</td>
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<td>1993–94</td>
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The regular armed forces totaled 370,000. They were administered by the war ministry, now once more renamed the defense ministry. Of course, SAVAK and the Imperial Guards were both abolished. The former was replaced with the much larger intelligence ministry; the latter with the Qods (Jerusalem) Force of some 2,000–5,000 select Revolutionary Guards. In other words, the armed forces now totaled more than half a million – 370,000 regular soldiers, 120,000 Revolutionary Guards, and some 200,000 support volunteers. The war with Iraq, like the hostage crisis, provided the regime with a highly potent rallying cry. Even those with strong reservations about the regime were willing to rally behind the government in a time of national emergency. It became a patriotic as well as a religious-inspired revolutionary war. The movie industry produced a number of full-length features such as *The Horizon* and *The Imposed War*, glorifying martyrdom in the front line.

The war expanded the state in many other ways. The economics ministry issued ration cards for all basic goods to provide the poor with necessities. It introduced price controls, opened food cooperatives, and restricted imports. It even tried to nationalize all foreign trade. The industries ministry took over factories abandoned by sixty-four entrepreneurs. In the midst of the revolution, a komiteh in the Central Bank had circulated a list of 177 millionaires who had supposedly absconded with fabulous sums. Even though the list may have been embellished, it named the obvious suspects – former aristocrats including the Aminis, Alams, Imamis, Zolfeqaris, Davalus, Dibas, and Farmanfarmas, who had entered the business world by taking advantage of court connections and low-interest state loans. Their flight from Iran had pre-dated that of the shah. The revolution put the final nail into the coffin of the notables. The government nationalized their enterprises in order to keep their employees working. The list is a real who’s who of the late Pahlavi era – ministers such as Jamshid Amouzegar and Houshang Ansari, as well as generals such as Jahanbani, Tofanian, and Oveissi. It also included self-made businessmen, some of whom, such as Habebe Elqanian and Hojaber Yazdani, had Jewish or Bahai origins. Ironically, leading figures from the old regime escaped the full wrath of the revolution. The state ended up with more than 2,000 factories – many of them operating in the red.

The justice ministry extended its reach across the whole legal system – from the Supreme Court, to regional courts, all the way down to local and revolutionary courts. According to conventional interpretations of the shari’a, local judges should have the final say in court decisions. According to the new structure, however, the final say resided in the
hands of the central state with its appeal system. In fact, the revolution did not dismantle the Pahlavi judiciary. It merely replaced secular-trained jurists with seminary-educated ones, and codified more features of the shari’a into state laws – especially into the Law of Retribution.

Similarly, the ministry of Islamic guidance launched a “Cultural Revolution” to combat “cultural imperialism.” Proponents declared it the Third Islamic Revolution. This type of linguistic rhetoric derived its pedigree from the previous regime which had declared a new revolution every time it had added a new clause to land reform. The new regime undid the Family Protection Law, lowering the marriage age for girls back to thirteen and allowing husbands to divorce wives without court permission. It purged both women from the judiciary and secular teachers from the educational system. It removed Bahais from government positions, closed down their temples, and arrested and even executed their leaders. It enforced on all a strict “Islamic code of public appearance” – men were discouraged from wearing ties, women were obliged to wear either scarves and long coats or preferably the full chador. Transgressors against these rules were fined and even physically punished. The regime also encouraged the public to take pilgrimages – not only to the conventional sites but also to the wishing well of Jamkaran near Qom where the Twelfth Imam had supposedly been sighted in more recent decades. Jamkaran – an invented tradition – became a popular pilgrimage site.

The regime censored newspapers, books, movies, and the airwaves; rewrote textbooks to eliminate favorable depictions of the monarchy and secular heroes; banned the use of European personal names; and removed from public places any references to previous monarchs – even distant ones. The famous Shah Mosque built by the Safavids in Isfahan was renamed the Imam Mosque. Streets and public squares bearing references to the Pahlavis were given new designations. Towns that had been renamed by Reza Shah reverted to their previous designations – for example, Pahlavi reverted back to Enzeli, Rezaieh to Urmiah; and Shahi to Aliabad.

The regime also waged a concerted media campaign in praise of the clergy. For example, a series of postage stamps highlighted their role throughout history as well as in the recent revolution. They featured Fazlollah Nuri, the mojtahed hanged by the constitutionalists in 1909; Ayatollah Modarres, Reza Shah’s outspoken opponent; Kuchek Khan, the Jangali leader, who was portrayed wearing a turban; Navab Safavi, the Fedayan-e Islam founder who assassinated a number of politicians and tried to kill Mossadeq; Ayatollah Kashani, the former Mossadeq supporter who turned against him in 1953; and Ayatollah Beheshti, the chairman of
the Assembly of Experts who was blown up by the Mojahedin in 1982. The official announcement claimed that this bomb had killed Beheshti and “his seventy-two companions.” Only four stamps – all designed during Bazargan’s brief administration – honored laymen: Mossadeq; Dehkhoda – the famous writer from the 1906 revolution; and Shariati and Al-e Ahmad – the early proponents of the return to Islam. Moreover, anniversary stamps for the revolution became increasingly more abstract and stylized as human figures receded from the scene. The overall aim was to Islamicize Iran. Extremists even advocated removing Nowruz from the official calendar, and converting the ancient ruins of Persepolis into a public urinal. For them, any sign of respect for pre-Islamic Iran smacked of paganism – sherk, jahlileh, and taquti.

The Islamic Republic not only expanded the ministries but created numerous semi-public religious foundations. The Mostazafen Foundation – successor to the Pahlavi Foundation – more than doubled its original assets when the new regime confiscated the property of some fifty millionaires.40 Because of the war with Iraq, its official name was expanded into the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled (Bonayad-e Mostazafen va Janbazan). By the late 1980s, its assets, totaling more than $20 billion, encompassed some 140 factories, 470 agrobusinesses, 100 construction firms, 64 mines, and 250 commercial companies. It also owned Coca-Cola – renamed Zam Zam Cola – and the former Hyatt and Hilton hotels, as well as Ettela’at and Kayhan. Likewise, the other foundations – all with specific missions – began with confiscated properties and grew with government subsidies and foreign exchange currencies far below the official rates. The Alavi Foundation, Martyrs Foundation, Pilgrimage Foundation, Housing Foundation, Foundation for War Refugees, and Foundation for Imam Khomeini’s Publications together employed in excess of 400,000 people.41 Their combined budgets were as much as half that of the central government. What is more, the long-existing shrines such as those of Imam Reza in Mashed, Fatemeh in Qom, and Abdul ‘Azim in Ray together owned as much as $8 billion of real estate. They were states within the state – or rather, clerical fiefdoms accountable only to the Supreme Leader.

The regime enjoyed good rapport with the bazaars – so much so that two prominent American social scientists have described the regime as a “bourgeois” republic.42 The Chamber of Commerce was packed with import-exporters who had impeccable records for giving alms. Its chairman served as minister of commerce. Other ministers had relatives in the bazaar and the clerical establishment. The Council of Guilds – which the shah had closed down – was revived as the Islamic Association of Bazaar Guilds. It expanded
to include wage earners in both stores and workshops. Its leaders, who had been imprisoned in 1965 for assassinating the prime minister, formed a parliamentary group named the Islamic Coalition Society. Its chairman, Habibollah Asgar-Owлади, was the brother of the commerce minister. Among his colleagues were the director of the Mostazafen Foundation, the warden of Evin Prison, and the director of a conglomerate dealing in cement, sugar and cotton. Rafsanjani, a pistachio grower and future president of the republic, had also been a member of the group in earlier years. Other well-connected bazaaris had lucrative contracts and import licenses with much coveted foreign currencies. The Guardian Council was filled with conservative judges who vetoed not only the nationalization of foreign trade but also a reform bill proposing to place a ceiling on landownership. Moreover, the Majles, which had been a debating chamber for notables in the distant past and a club for the shah’s placemen in more recent years, was now filled with the propertied middle class. For example, more than 70 percent of the deputies in the First Islamic Majles came from that class. Their fathers included 63 clergymen, 69 farm owners, 39 shopkeepers, and 12 merchants.

Furthermore, Khomeini went out of his way to stress that Islam considered property to be sacred, that the clergy would respect private ownership, and that the constitution guaranteed the private sector a special role in the economy. In 1981 he launched an Eight Point Declaration instructing the authorities to respect people’s “movable and immovable possessions, including homes, stores, workshops, farms, and factories.” In an address to a delegation of merchants and guild leaders, he praised them for financing mosques and seminaries, upholding Islam throughout history, and playing a key role in the recent revolution. “Previous rulers,” he continued, “did not dare to set foot in the bazaars. But things are very different now. The president and the bazaaris are all brothers.” In his last will and testament, he advised future generations to respect property on the grounds that free enterprise turns the “wheels of the economy” and prosperity would produce “social justice” for all, including the poor. “Islam,” he proclaimed, “differs sharply from communism. Whereas we respect private property, communism advocates the sharing of all things – including wives and homosexuals.” Ali Khamenei, his successor as Supreme Leader, continued in the same vein, arguing that Islam respects the bazaar, that the Koran praises commerce, and that socialists, not Muslims, associate business with theft, corruption, greed, and exploitation. “The bazaar,” he declared, “helped the Islamic Revolution and continues to be the bastion supporting the Islamic Republic.” In the words of the London Economist: “The bazaar enjoys a
close relationship with the regime, benefiting from business contracts in exchange for funding individual mosques and conservative parliamentary and presidential candidates.”

The new regime reached out beyond the bazaars into the countryside. Even though it placed no ceiling on landownership, it distributed more than 850,000 hectares of confiscated agrobusiness land to some 220,000 peasant families in Gurgan, Mazanderan, and Khuzestan. The new farmers formed more than 10,000 cooperatives. The regime assisted farmers in other ways. It raised agricultural prices – helping the country become self-sufficient in cereal production; channeled the Reconstruction Crusade into the provinces; launched an ambitious literacy campaign among the peasantry; and extended roads, electricity, piped water, and, most important of all, health clinics, into the villages. This strategy – which continued into the next decade – transformed the countryside, turning peasants into farmers. Soon most farmers had access not only to roads, schools, clinics, electricity, and piped water, but also to such consumer goods as radios, refrigerators, telephones, televisions, motorbikes, even pickup trucks. One key indicator illustrates the dramatic changes in everyday life: on the eve of the revolution, life expectancy at birth had been less than 56; by the end of the century, it was near 70.

The regime brought other benefits to the working class. It spent a quarter of the annual budget in subsidies to the poorer population – direct subsidies for bread, rice, sugar, cheese, fuel, and cooking oil, as well as indirect subsidies for electricity, sanitation, and piped water. It set up a Worker’s House, and passed a Labor Law, which, while not legalizing strikes and free unions, gave factory workers significant concessions: 6-day, 48-hour workweeks, paid Fridays, a minimum wage, 12-day annual holidays, and some semblance of job security. Worker’s House published the paper Kar va Kargar (Work and Worker), and organized annual May Day rallies with slogans reminiscent of the Tudeh Party. Some statistics show the fundamental changes taking place throughout the country: the percentage of children in school rose from 60 to 90; infant mortality per 1,000 dropped from 104 to 25; the annual population growth hit an all-time high of 3.2 percent – increasing the total population from 34 million in 1976 to 50 million in 1989, and to nearly 70 million in 2000; and, most important of all, the literacy rate doubled, almost eradicating illiteracy among the age group between six and twenty-nine. This meant that for the first time in history most of the population, including Azeris, Kurds, Gilakis, and Mazanderanis, could converse and read in Persian.
Finally, the Islamic Republic consolidated itself by using the stick as well as the carrot. It unleashed a reign of terror worthy of the Jacobins when the Mojahedin – supported by President Bani-Sadr – tried to overthrow the government in June 1981 and instead ended up assassinating numerous prominent figures including the speaker of the Assembly of Experts, the chair of the Supreme Court, the chief of the revolutionary courts, the head of the gendarmerie, the editor of Kayhan, four cabinet ministers, ten deputy ministers, twenty-eight Majles deputies, two imam jum’ehs, and the new president – Muhammad Rajai. They also wounded Khomeini’s two closest advisors: Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamenei, the future Supreme Leader; and Hojjat al-Islam Ali-Akbar Hasehmi Rafsanjani, the speaker of the Majles and also future president. Khamenei used the anniversary of Mossadeq’s death to declare ominously: “We are not liberals, like Allende, whom the CIA can snuff out.”

In the twenty-eight months between February 1979 and June 1981, revolutionary courts had executed 497 political opponents as “counter-revolutionaries” and “sowers of corruption on earth.” They included Hoveida, the former premier; 6 cabinet ministers – one of whom was accused of nourishing “cultural imperialism”; 3 chiefs and 90 operatives of SAVAK; 33 Bahais and 1 Jewish businessman accused of spying for Israel; 35 generals, 25 colonels, 20 majors, and 125 non-commissioned officers. In the next four years from June 1981 until June 1985, revolutionary courts executed more than 8,000 opponents. Although they targeted mainly the Mojahedin, they also went after others – even some who opposed the Mojahedin. The victims included Fedayins and Kurds as well as Tudeh, National Front, and Shariatmadari supporters. Many – including Shariatmadari, Bazargan supporters, and Tudeh leaders – were forced to appear on television and recant their previous views. Thus the toll taken among those who had participated in the revolution was far greater than that among the royalists. This revolution – like others – had devoured its own children. The regime also took the unprecedented step of defrocking Shariatmadari on the trumped-up charge of plotting to kill Khomeini.

One final bloodletting came in 1988, immediately after Khomeini ended the war by accepting a UN-mediated ceasefire. He announced that he had no choice but to “drink the poisoned chalice.” In four short weeks, special courts set up in the main prisons hanged more than 2,800 prisoners – Amnesty International described them as “prisoners of conscience.” Former Mojahedin were executed on suspicion they harbored secret sympathies for the organization. Leftists were executed for “apostasy” on the grounds they had turned their backs on God, the Prophet, the Koran, and
the Resurrection. Their bodies were dumped into a desolate area known as Kafarestan (Land of the Unbelievers) and Lanatabad (Land of the Damned). This extraordinary bloodbath has one plausible explanation. Khomeini, in his dying years, was eager to leave behind disciples baptized in a common bloodbath. The killing would test their mettle, weeding out the halfhearted from the true believers, the weak-willed from the fully committed, and the wishy-washy from the resolute. It would force them to realize that they would stand or fall together. What is more, it would sever ties between religious populists within his movement and secular radicals outside. Some of his followers had toyed with the dangerous notion of working with the Tudeh Party to incorporate more radical clauses into the Labor Law as well as into the Land Reform Law. To unify his disciples further against the West, Khomeini issued his famous and unprecedented fatwa against Salman Rushdie. He declared that Rushdie, a Muslim-born Indian living in Britain, could lawfully be killed on the grounds that his book *Satanic Verses* satirized the Prophet and therefore proved that he was an “apostate.” The 1988 bloodbath had its intended effect. Within months, Grand Ayatollah Hussein Montazeri, who since the revolution had been groomed to be the next Supreme Leader, resigned in protest and went into retirement in Qom – where he became a non-person. By the time Khomeini died a few months later, in June 1989, he could feel confident that he was leaving his republic in secure hands.

**Thermidor (1989–2005)**

The transfer of power took place smoothly. On his deathbed, Khomeini appointed a twenty-five-man Constitutional Reform Council which named Khamenei as the next Supreme Leader and drew up amendments to the original constitution. Since the senior mojtaheds had given lukewarm support to the revolution and the groomed heir, Montazeri, had strayed from the straight path, they dropped the original prerequisite that the leadership of the republic had to be in the hands of either a paramount faqeh or a council of senior faqehs. They decided that the Supreme Leader could be a seminary-trained cleric with the right qualifications – “honesty,” “piety,” “courage,” “administrative abilities,” and “versed in the political issues of the age.” One delegate even argued that the velayat-e faqeh did not require a faqeh. In designating Khamenei as Supreme Leader, they, together with the official press, began to address him and his close colleagues, including Hojjat al-Islam Rafsanjani, as ayatollahs. The republic has often been dubbed the regime of ayatollahs. It could more aptly be
called that of hojjat al-islams. The Leader ceased to be addressed also as the Supreme Faqeh – he became simply the Supreme Leader.

The Reform Council amended the constitution in many other ways. The Majles-e Melli (National Assembly) became the Majles-e Islami (Islamic Assembly). The Assembly of Experts – increased to eighty-six members – obtained the authority to convene at least once a year, and to determine whether the Supreme Leader was “mentally and physically capable of carrying out his arduous duties.” The Assembly of Experts itself was to be elected by the public every six years. The Reform Council also transformed the Expediency Council into a permanent body with members appointed by the Supreme Leader as well as representatives from the three branches of government, the armed forces, the intelligence service, and the Guardian Council. In other words, the Expediency Council became an upper house of some forty power-brokers. In July 1989 – seven weeks after Khomeini’s death – the Reform Council submitted its amendments to a national referendum. In the same elections, Rafsanjani ran against a relatively unknown to replace Khamenei as president. The results were a foregone conclusion. The amendments passed with 97 percent voting yes. Rafsanjani won with 94 percent. The turnout, however, was less than 55 percent – a 20 percent drop since the last referendum.

The duumvirate of Khamenei and Rafsanjani initiated a Thermidor. In a televised sermon, Khamenei informed the nation that Imam Ali had been a successful plantation owner, who, when not out fighting for Islam, had stayed home meticulously cultivating his property. He added that Imam Ali had taken care of his appearance and had worn the best clothes possible when preaching.\textsuperscript{56} Imam Ali, a former member of the mostazafen, became a plantation owner. Meanwhile, Rafsanjani forthrightly declared that “it was time to put away childish things,” that many were guilty of “excesses, crudities, and irresponsible behavior,” and that it was high time the revolution went on its proper and healthy course.\textsuperscript{57} They took immediate measures to liberalize the economy, although they avoided the label “liberal” – a term closely associated in the public mind with secular intellectuals, Bazargan, and the West. What is more, Khomeini had often denounced liberalism as an integral part of the “Western plague.” The two new leaders abolished rationing; relaxed price controls; and tried to balance the budget. They also tried to trim the bureaucracy, and, although they failed, they managed to reduce the total number of ministries from twenty-five to twenty-one by merging the ministries of heavy industry with industries, higher education with education, revolutionary guards with defense, and reconstruction with Islamic guidance. In addition, they imported consumer
goods as well as essentials to relieve shortages; stopped the anti-hoarding campaigns; returned some real estate to previous owners; printed less paper money; narrowed the gap between the official and the black-market price of the dollar; revitalized the national stock exchange; started five free trade zones; lowered business taxes; and, most important of all, reduced the defense budget – which had been as high as 17 percent of the gross national product in the shah’s last years – to less than 2 percent of GNP. Thus resources continued to flow into development programs: education, health, electrification, rural roads, urban renewal, city parks, and the Tehran subways, as well as into capital-intensive projects such as steel, car manufacturing, and petrochemicals – even the nuclear program was restarted. These programs retained their impetus even though the price of oil continued to fluctuate widely.

The regime’s most visible success was its promotion of birth control. In 1989, the government, having previously encouraged population growth, reversed gears and declared that Islam favored families with only two children. It opened birth control clinics – especially for women; distributed condoms and pills; cut subsidies to large families; introduced sex education into the school curriculum; and held mandatory classes for newlyweds. It also discouraged polygamy by encouraging women to have husbands sign prenuptial contracts agreeing not to take second wives and to divide property equally in case of divorce. Between 1989 and 2003, the annual population growth fell from an all-time high of 3.2 percent to 1.2. In the same period, the fertility rate – the average number of children born to a woman in her lifetime – plummeted from 7 to 3. The UN expects the figure will go down to 2 by 2012 – this would give the country a zero population growth. The UN has praised Iran for having the most successful population control program in the whole world. The campaign owed its success to the government’s ability to reach the rural population through the mass media, literacy campaigns, and village health clinics. It was also helped by the rising marriage age which averaged thirty for men and twenty-six for women.

Khamenei and Rafsanjani, however, parted company when the latter, after a state visit to Peking, toyed with the Chinese model of economic development. He talked of cutting subsidies for food, fuel, and gasoline; trimming financial support for the clerical foundations; bringing these foundations under state supervision; privatizing companies that had been nationalized in 1979; and, most important of all, attracting foreign and expatriate capital by allowing free flow of profits; permitting citizens living abroad to hold foreign citizenships; convening conferences for foreign and
expatriate investors; granting territorial concessions to foreign oil companies, such as the contract worth $1 billion to the American Conoco. He also talked of diluting the Labor Law to make factory ownership more profitable; and drafting a new Investment Law to allow foreigners to own as much as 45 percent of companies. These proposals aroused the opposition not only of Khamenei and the Guardian Council, but also of the majority in the Majles and the dominant figures in the bazaar.

Ironically, Rafsanjani also ran up against the US government, which, in the aftermath of the hostage crisis, continued to see Iran as a major regional threat both to America and Israel. Congress passed the Iran Sanctions Act which threatened to penalize foreign as well as American oil companies that dared to invest more than $20 million in Iran. The drying up of foreign investment, together with another fall in oil prices – from $20 per barrel in 1991 to $12 in 1994 – added to Iran’s external debt, strained the currency, and thereby triggered an economic recession. The rial, which had already fallen from 7 to the dollar before the revolution to 1,749 to the dollar in 1989, plummeted to 6,400 to the dollar in 1995. Meanwhile, unemployment reached 30 percent, and the price of sugar, rice, and butter rose threefold – and that of bread sixfold. Exiles predicted the imminent demise of the Islamic Republic.

The economic crisis, however, paved the way not to revolution but to reform. In 1997, Rafsanjani ended his two-term presidency and was barred by the constitution from running again. In an untypical miscalculation, the Guardian Council permitted Hojjat al-Islam Sayyed Muhammad Khatemi, a relatively unknown and mild-mannered former minister of culture, to run against the conservative, flamboyant, and well-known Speaker of the Majles. In addition to having been prominent in national politics since 1978, the conservative candidate had the backing of much of the establishment: the Association of Militant Clergy, the main ecclesiastical body; the Chamber of Commerce, Association of Farmers, and Association of Guilds and Trades; the Islamic Coalition Society; the Office of Imam Jum’ehs; and the heads of the large foundations, the main seminaries, and, of course, the Revolutionary Guards. Most observers, including the London Economist, expected a shoo-in. Khatemi’s organized support was limited to the Society of Militant Clergy – an offshoot of the Association of Militant Clergy; the Islamic Student Association; the newly created Labor Party attached to the Worker’s House; the Kargozaran-e Sazandegi (Construction Executives) – a party formed recently by Rafsanjani; Zan (Women), a newspaper edited by Rafsanjani’s daughter; the semi-legal Liberation Movement; and the Mojahedin Organization of the Islamic Revolution – a circle of intellectuals and technocrats radical in economic policies but relatively liberal in cultural matters.
Khatemi’s main asset was his liberal reputation. The fact that he was a sayyed also helped. As minister of culture under Rafsanjani, he had tried to loosen censorship and had been accused by Ettela’at and Kayhan of disseminating “corrupt and immoral films and books.” Complaining that overly stringent censorship had produced a “stagnant and retrograde climate,” he resigned quietly from his ministerial post in 1992 and took up the directorship of the National Library. He also taught Western political thought at Tehran University. His demeanor was more like that of a university professor than a revolutionary cleric. He ran his campaign for the presidency on the themes of nourishing “civil society,” curing the “sick economy,” and replacing the “clash of civilizations” with a “dialogue of civilizations.” He hammered away on the importance of having an open society with individual liberties, free expression, women’s rights, political pluralism, and, most important of all, rule of law. He visited supermarkets, used city buses, and traveled in a small private car with his wife in the driver’s seat. His campaign managers went out of their way to stress that he knew German, having supervised the Iranian mosque in Hamburg before the revolution. They also stressed that the philosophical books he had written had much praise for such Western thinkers as Hume, Kant, Descartes, Locke, Voltaire, and Montesquieu. “The essence of Iranian history,” he declared, “is the struggle for democracy.”

He won hands-down with 70 percent of the vote in a campaign in which 80 percent of the electorate participated. In the previous presidential campaign, only 50 percent had voted. His support cut across regions and class lines – even Revolutionary Guards and Qom seminarians voted for him. But his core support came from the modern middle class, college students, women, and urban workers. The reformers immediately launched the newspaper Khordad (May), named after the month when they had won the presidential election. They soon became known as the Khordad Movement. Khatemi’s brother, a medical doctor, founded the paper Moshakerat (Participation) and the Islamic Iran Participation Party. Khordad and Moshakerat soon outsold the long-established Kayhan and Ettela’at.

These reform newspapers, together with others that followed, changed the whole tenor of public discussion. In previous decades, the key terms in public discourse had been emperialism, mostazafen, jehad, mojahed, shahed (martyrdom), khish (roots), engelab (revolution), and gharbzadegi (Western intoxication). Now the key terms were demokrasi, pluralism, moderniyat, azadi (liberty), barabari (equality), jam’eh-e madani (civil society), boqouq-e beshar (human rights), mosakerat-e siyasi (political participation), gost-e gou
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<td>Blacksmith</td>
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Table 14 Presidents, 1980–2007
(dialogue), and the brand new word *shahrvandi* (citizenship). This was a cultural turn almost as significant as that of the 1979 revolution. The new intellectuals – many of whom had started political careers as militant revolutionaries – cited freely not only Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquiou, but also Hume, Kant, and Descartes. In some ways, the clock had been turned back to the Constitutional Revolution. But these intellectuals were oblivious to any irony since they – like most of their compatriots – had little appreciation of early twentieth-century history. Their public discourse placed as much stress on Iran as on Islam, on pre-Muslim Persia as on Shi‘i Islam, and on national celebrations such as Nowruz and nationalization of the oil company as on Muharram and Ramadan. Nationalism appeared to have attained a happy synthesis between pre-Islamic Iran and Islam – at least, Shi‘i Islam.

The reformers followed up the 1997 triumph with three equally spectacular victories. They obtained 75 percent of the vote in local elections in 1999, when 334,000 candidates – including some 5,000 women – competed for 115,000 seats on provincial, town, and village councils. In parliamentary elections in 2000, they won 80 percent of the vote and obtained 195 of the 290 Majles seats. Khatemi’s brother topped the list in Tehran. And in 2001, Khatemi won a second term as president increasing his vote by two million and receiving 80 percent of all votes cast. More than 67 percent of the electorate participated. The president was now able to fill the cabinet with his own supporters. *The Economist* commented: “Iran, although an Islamic state, imbued with religion and religious symbolism, is an increasingly anti-clerical country. In a sense it resembles some Roman Catholic countries where religion is taken for granted, without public display, and with ambiguous feelings towards the clergy. Iranians tend to mock their mullahs, making mild jokes about them; they certainly want them out of their bedrooms. In particular, they dislike their political clergy.” The clergy, it added, complained that more than 70 percent of the population did not perform their daily prayers and that less than 2 percent attended Friday mosques. In other words, the reformers, with enthusiastic popular support, had won control not only over local assemblies but also over the legislative and executive branches of the national government. The conservative core was confined to less than 25 percent of the electorate. This can be described as their solid “base.”

Khatemi used these victories to open up both foreign relations and internal politics. He avoided the sensitive issue of state dominance over the economy – in part because he did not want to lose labor support, and in part because Rafsanjani had learnt through hard experience that tampering
with the privileges of the foundations and the bazaars was tantamount to hitting the third rail of Iranian politics. He, therefore, skirted around this main economic obstacle, and instead continued to funnel revenues—which, fortunately for him, rapidly increased as the price of a barrel of oil went from $10 in 1997 to $65 in 2003. The state continued to be able to expand development programs for education, electrification, housing, rural construction, and nuclear installations. By 2000, 94 percent of the population had access to medical facilities and safe water; 97 percent of those between six and twenty-nine were literate; the mortality rate was the best in the Middle East; and women formed 63 percent of university students, 54 percent of college enrollment, and 45 percent of doctors. The government also put aside a portion of the oil revenues for emergencies.

In foreign affairs, Khatemi launched a campaign to improve relations with the outside world. He paid state visits to Tokyo, Moscow, Madrid, Rome, and Paris, where, at the Pantheon, he laid wreaths for Rousseau, Zola, and Victor Hugo. He assured international lawyers that the courts would no longer resort to stoning and would be sparing in imposing corporal punishments. He hosted a conference on dialogue between civilizations, and a human rights delegation from the European Union. He told CNN how much he admired the West, especially America. “The secret of American civilization,” he opined, “lies on Plymouth Rock.” He even expressed “regret” for the student takeover of the US embassy. He invited foreigners to invest in Iran—especially in oil exploration, oil refining, and oil pipelines. He announced—in a clear break with precedent—that Iran would accept a two-state solution for Palestine if the Palestinians themselves agreed to such a settlement. He relaxed restrictions on the Bahais, and persuaded Khamenei quietly to amnesty a group of Jews who had been framed for spying for Israel. He also assured Britain that Iran had no intention of implementing the fatwa against Rushdie.

In return, Britain reestablished full diplomatic relations which had been broken since 1979. President Clinton loosened the economic embargo, permitting the export of medical and farm goods and the import of rugs and pistachios. His secretary of state came close to apologizing for the 1953 coup. At the UN, fifteen European countries refrained from introducing motions critical of Iran. The UN itself dropped Iran from its list of human rights violators. The World Bank—without US approval—lent Iran $232 million for medical services and sewage lines. European, Russian, and Japanese firms—again without American approval—agreed to invest $12 billion in the oil, gas, and automobile industries. Euros flowed into the stock exchange in Tehran. And the International Monetary Fund (IMF)
gave Iran high marks in 2003 for its fiscal reforms – especially for balancing the budget.

In internal politics, liberals in the Majles passed more than a hundred reform bills. These included the explicit ban on all forms of torture and physical coercion, including sleep deprivation, blindfolding, and solitary confinement; the right of political prisoners to have legal counsel, access to their families, and trial by judges with at least ten years’ experience; the establishment of a special press court independent of the judiciary to deal with issues of libel and censorship; the right of all accused to jury trials with strict separation between judges and prosecutors; and the presidential authority to remove activist judges who blatantly interfere in politics and overextend their judicial powers. They tried to transfer the authority to supervise elections and vet candidates from the Guardian Council to the interior ministry. “The constitution,” they argued, “gave the Guardian Council the authority to oversee elections – not to fix and interfere with them.” Some deputies openly talked of the need for a referendum to strengthen the democratic features of the constitution.

The liberal deputies also made a pitch for women’s support. They allowed women to study abroad on state scholarships; colleagues to wear headscarf instead of the full chador; and schoolgirls to wear colourful clothes. They even passed bills directly contradicting traditional interpretations of the shari’a. They eliminated all distinctions between men and women, between Muslims and non-Muslims, in accepting witnesses in court and awarding monetary compensations for damages. They increased the marriageable age for girls to fifteen. They reopened the judiciary to women. They gave them equal rights in divorce courts and permitted them to have custody rights over children under the age of seven. Never before in the Middle East had a freely elected parliament so blatantly challenged basic tenets of the shari’a. What is more, they ratified the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – the USA has still refused to ratify this highly egalitarian convention. The liberal cause was further bolstered when Shiren Ebadi, a human rights lawyer, won the Nobel Peace Prize, and Ayatollah Youssef Sanai, one of Khomeini’s favorite disciples, came out in full support of women’s rights. He ruled that the law should not differentiate between the sexes, and that women should have the right to become presidents, chief judges, and even Supreme Leaders.

The reformers managed to end political assassinations at home and abroad. They purged from the intelligence ministry a group of operatives who had carried out “serial killings” of dissidents – their ringleader “committed suicide” before he could implicate his superiors. They relaxed the
controls placed on Montazeri, the ayatollah who had been groomed to succeed Khomeini. They sent parliamentary committees into prisons, removing some wardens, releasing more political inmates, and improving the conditions of others. They imposed restraints on basej vigilantes who harassed middle-class youth, especially girls, for listening to music, watching videos, having satellite dishes, not covering their heads fully, and having private parties. One party-goer joked: “In the old days, when we heard the door bell we froze in fear. Now we know someone is late.”

European reporters noted that whereas the basej had grown sparse in the northern middle-class suburbs they continued to be a problem in the southern slums: “In the working class suburbs they remain popular for their piety and their patriotism and for bringing the rich kids down a peg or two.”

The reformers also channeled state funds into non-government organizations: local clubs, theaters, and cultural centers; newspapers – the number of dailies increased from five to twenty-six and their combined daily circulation rose from 1.2 million to 3.2 million. The number of journals rose from 778 to 1,375; and the number of book titles from 14,500 to 23,300 with a total circulation of 118 million – in 1986 the number of book titles had been as few as 3,800 with a circulation of fewer than 28 million.

Hamshahri (Citizen), a daily owned by the mayor’s office in Tehran with a circulation of 460,000, became the first paper in Iran to survive through advertisements. The consumer market had finally come to Iran. The liberals scored their most celebrated cultural success in the international film community by winning prizes at Cannes and Venice. Films such as Two Women, The Hidden Half, Gilaneh, Marriage of the Blessed, A Taste of Cherry, A Time for Drunken Horses, A Moment of Innocence, and Once Upon a Time Cinema dealt with social issues, especially the plight of women, children, the poor, and war veterans. One of the most celebrated directors was a former Revolutionary Guard. Of course, the movie industry was heavily subsidized by the state.

The conservatives hit back. The Guardian Council vetoed most of the reform bills on the grounds they violated the shari’a and the constitution. The judiciary closed down an increasing number of papers, eventually banning more than sixty publications in what became known as the “great newspaper massacre.” It also brought charges of “apostasy” against the new intellectuals. One historian was taken to task for arguing that Islam needed a Protestant Reformation. A journalist was imprisoned for writing that he could not find traces of velayat-e faqeh in the Koran or in the teachings of the Twelve Imams. Another was arrested for noting that the veil pre-dated Islam and originated instead in ancient pagan civilizations.
Yet another was incarcerated for publishing a public opinion poll which showed that the majority of Iranians wanted to improve relations with the USA even though they distrusted Washington. One paper was even banned for reprinting a New Deal cartoon of FDR’s hand pressing down on white-bearded Supreme Court judges. Zan, edited by Rafsanjani’s daughter, was banned for a cartoon showing a husband pleading with a mugger to go after his wife with the caption that according to the shari’a her “blood money” would be only half that of his. The Liberation Movement was outlawed on the grounds it did not sincerely believe in the concept of velayat-e faqeh. The mayor of Tehran – a Rafsanjani protégé – was tried on trumped-up charges of financial corruption. Moreover, the Revolutionary Guards – supported by vigilantes – broke up a protest meeting in Tehran University injuring more than a hundred and ransacking the student dormitories. Khatemi took the opportunity of December 7 both to celebrate that day and to warn that such clashes would undermine democracy and pave the way for the emergence of extremism. Furthermore, the Guardian Council barred more than 2,000 candidates, including 87 deputies, from the forthcoming Majles elections. The barred deputies complained: “Our revolution brought freedom and independence in the name of Islam. But now our national rights are being trampled upon in the name of Islam.”

The reformers suffered yet another blow from an unexpected quarter – the United States. It came in the form of the “axis of evil” speech delivered by President Bush in January 2002. In naming Iran as a major threat to world peace, he accused it of aspiring to build nuclear weapons and of financing international terrorism directed at the United States. He also accused its “unelected leaders” of depriving the Iranian people of their freedoms. His national security advisor followed, denouncing Iran as a “totalitarian” nightmare. The speech came as a bolt from the blue since the state department and Iran had been working closely but quietly behind the scenes over Afghanistan – in overthrowing the Taliban and installing a new government in Kabul. The speech took the state department as much as Iran by surprise. A Western correspondent in Tehran reported: “Khatemi blames Bush’s axis of evil speech for plunging Iran into an extended crisis that has played into the hands of his conservative opponents and has frozen hopes of domestic reform.” A British intelligence analyst argued that the speech had been counterproductive since it “played into the hands of the conservatives, bolstered their anti-Americanism, and helped silence the reformers.” An American journalist reported: “President Bush came to the rescue of the conservatives by naming Iran as part of the axis of evil. This threw the reformers on the defensive.” The New York Times reported:
“Ever since President Bush designated Iran part of the international terrorist network open to American attack, conservatives in Iran have been buoyed, trying to use a resurgence of disgust with America to quash reform at home. This has made it harder for President Khatemi to preserve his reformist agenda for promoting democracy.”72 One of the new Iranian intellectuals visiting Harvard complained that the speech “emboldened the conservatives to crack down further on those promoting change.”73 Another noted that the speech “energized the conservatives and infused a sense of urgency into their efforts to regain power.”74 Most serious of all, the speech, together with the other setbacks, divided the whole reform movement. Some, notably Khatemi, continued to insist that it was still possible to bring about reform from within the system. Others talked of the need for a more militant campaign – even a referendum. Yet others, disillusioned by the prospects of reform, withdrew from active politics. The liberal euphoria had evaporated.

This gave the conservatives the opportunity to win a series of elections – for municipal councils in 2003, for the Majles in 2004, and for the presidency in 2005. In all three campaigns, the conservative Militant Clergy Association and the Islamic Coalition Society ran against the liberal Militant Clergy Society, Islamic Iran Participation Party, Construction Executives, and Worker’s House. The conservatives won in part because they retained their 25 percent base; in part because they recruited war veterans to run as their candidates; in part because they wooed independents on the issue of national security; but in most part because large numbers of women, college students, and other members of the salaried middle class stayed home. Turnout in the Majles elections fell below 51 percent – one of the worst since the revolution. In Tehran, it fell to 28 percent.

In the presidential elections, Mahmud Ahmadinejad – a relatively unknown candidate – won on the double platform of strengthening national security and fulfilling the populist promises of the Khomeini era. Describing himself as champion of the mostazafen as well as an osulgar (principalist) and abadgar (developer) – two recently coined terms – Ahmadinejad promised to raise wages and salaries, especially for teachers and government workers; alleviate poverty; tackle unemployment and poor housing; distribute bonuses to newlyweds; deliver “social justice” to the masses, particularly to war veterans; and, most emphatically of all, remove the cancerous sore of corruption which many felt endangered the whole body politic. He claimed that the masses were being “plundered” by “new capitalists” (sarmayedar-an-e now) as well as by remnants of the “one
thousand families.” He denounced the stock exchange as a “den of gambling.” He even accused his main opponent, Rafsanjani, of having converted the oil ministry into a family fiefdom and turned himself into one of the richest men in the country. The populist rhetoric was helped by television coverage of Ahmadinejad’s own apartment showing that he lived a simple lower-middle-class life. Also helpful was the fact that Ahmadinejad’s father had been a blacksmith – the same occupation as that of Kaveh, one of the lead heroes in the Shabnameh. Class identity was alive and well in Iran – despite all the changes brought about by the Islamic Revolution. With the reformers divided, Ahmadinejad swept the elections – although with a much lower turnout than in the previous two presidential contests. The conservatives had won not so much by expanding their limited core base as by dividing the reformers and discouraging them from voting. Electoral politics had come to Iran in all its complex aspects.

**CONTEMPORARY IRAN**

Iran entered the twenty-first century as a major regional power – certainly in the Persian Gulf, if not in the entire Middle East. With some 70 million people, it is the largest country in the region. It plays a key role in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, is the world’s third largest producer of oil, and has the globe’s third or perhaps even second largest proven reserves of gas and oil. It will remain important so long as the hydrocarbon age lasts. It has produced over the past century a strong centralized state – one whose arm reaches from the capital into the outlying provinces, touching in one way or another almost every citizen. It also controls a mass citizen army, which, although unequipped to wage offensive war, would be highly effective for defensive purposes. Iran cannot be dismissed as a “failed” state – unlike some in the region. Thanks mainly to oil revenues, it has brought citizens a respectable standard of living: low infant mortality, reasonable longevity, high literacy, impressive college enrollment – including for women – and for many of its citizens access not only to electricity, piped water, and modern transportation, but also to such consumer goods as refrigerators, telephones, radios, televisions, and cars. It now contains a large salaried middle class and an educated working class as well as a traditional entrepreneurial middle class. In many ways, the country is no longer part of the Third World.

What is more, Iran is bound together with a sense of national identity derived not only from its Shi’i and pre-Islamic heritages, but also from the shared experiences of the past century – the imperial threat from the West,
the Constitutional Revolution, the nationalist movement led by Mossadeq, the traumatic 1953 coup, the Pahlavi era, and, of course, the dramatic experiences of both the Islamic Revolution and the total war with Iraq. Iranian identity has been forged not only by common history, common geography, common language, and common religion, but also by common experience in the recent past – including nine presidential and seven parliamentary elections since 1979. History has turned subjects, peasants, and often non-Persian speakers into fully fledged Iranian citizens. This national identity is questioned only in the peripheral Sunni regions inhabited by Kurds, Turkmans, and Baluchis. Unlike many states in the region, Iran is not the product of imperial map-making.

Iran’s emergence as a regional power has brought it into a collision course with the other major power in the region – the United States, especially with the latter’s recent occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as establishment of military bases in the Caucasus and Central Asia, not to mention the earlier ones in Turkey and the Gulf sheikhdoms. Their relations are further complicated by the fact that Shi’is in the region – in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon – look toward Iran as their main protector against local and external threats. The USA–Iran rivalry has recently focused on the highly explosive issue of nuclear technology. Iran vehemently insists on the right to develop such technology, citing international law, the need to find energy alternatives, and the inalienable right of developing countries to enter the modern world by harnessing what it sees to be the cutting edge of science. It adds that it has no intention of expanding its current nuclear program to producing weapons. The USA insists with equal vehemence that Iran should not be trusted with nuclear technology – some even argue not with any nuclear know-how – because its real intention is to develop weapons of mass destruction. Such weapons, the USA claims, will not only violate international law, but will also change the whole balance of power in the region and pose an imminent threat to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf sheikhdoms – not to mention the American presence in the Middle East. The forthcoming decade will probably answer the question as to how this explosive issue will be worked out: by one side or the other backing down; by a negotiated compromise in which the two powers learn to live together in the same dangerous neighborhood; or by ongoing brinkmanship which could easily escalate into a catastrophe on the magnitude of Europe’s Thirty Years War.