

## Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution was a series of events from 7 January 1978 to 11 February 1979 that ultimately resulted in the overthrow of the pro-western regime of Pahlavi dynasty under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, subsequently being replaced by an anti-Western Theocracy under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Iranian Revolution was an unusual surprise for the world, as it took place during a time of relative prosperity and peace and the non-violent way in which the transition of government took place, considering the fact that modern revolutions of the 20th century were always violent in nature (for example the Russian Revolution).

The Iranian Revolution would have a serious effect on the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, with serious implications for the rest of the world itself. The facts and details of the Iranian revolution will be discussed at length in this article. The information gained can be used in the World History segment of the UPSC Mains Exam.

### Background of the Iranian Revolution

To properly understand the cause of the Iranian revolution, one must first understand the influence of the Shi'a *ulema* (clergy) on the civil society of Iran. This influence was demonstrated with full force during the 1891 Tobacco Protests.

The protests were a result of certain monopolistic concessions regarding the production and sale of tobacco in Iran granted by the Shah to a British company. These concessions were a major blow to the livelihoods of the Iranian farmers; and the Iranian clergy as a result organised a series of protests and boycotts forced the Shah to cancel the concession.

This demonstration of the Ulema's power would come to the fore years later.

During World War II, Iran was invaded by the British and the Soviet Union. Although neutral at the time, the Shah of Iran - Reza Shah - was believed to have pro-Axis leanings. The Allies would not let Iran, with its valuable oil fields, risk falling into the hands of the Axis. Reza Shah was deposed and replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi..

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was a pro-western monarch who sought a special relationship with the Western nations. With one notable exception in 1953, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ruled his country until the 1978 revolution. The one exception to this was the 1953 power struggle between Reza Pahlavi's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. Reza Pahlavi had to flee to Italy as a result.

Mossadegh was a popular individual who nationalized Iran's oil fields and was democratically elected by the people. Mossadegh was deposed by Reza Pahlavi and restored to the Iranian throne as a result with the help of the American CIA and the British MI6 who were concerned about the Soviet Union's influence in the region during the larger Cold War.

This did not go down well with the Iranian people, as both the times Reza Pahlavi had come to power with the help of the west. Also, Reza's modernization program, which largely replaced Islamic cultural norms with that of Western values, did not seem to help matters. The Iranian people further saw the Pahlavi dynasty as nothing more than western puppets that was severely compromising Iranian sovereignty

Reza Shah Pahlavi introduced a series of reforms along western lines in the 1960s. This was called the White Revolution. He sought to embark on a period of modernization that he believed would subvert the traditional system and create a new era of equality.

What the Shah did not expect, however, was that the White Revolution led to new social tensions that helped create many of the problems the Shah had been trying to avoid. The Shah's reforms more than quadrupled the combined size of the two classes that had posed the most challenges to his monarchy in the past—the intelligentsia and the urban working class.

The most vocal critic of these reforms was a Shia cleric - Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He publicly lambasted the Shah and his reforms, and was exiled as a result. This only made Khomeini more popular as a result of the opposition to the Shah and his regime.

The economic policies have only resulted in large-scale unemployment and as a result drawing more disaffected youth towards Khomeini and his faction.

For his part, Ayatollah Khomeini has popularized the notion that Iranians should return to their cultural and religious roots by resisting the hegemony of the West. Sensing the widespread support enjoyed by Khomeini, the secular intellectuals - who would otherwise oppose religious figures like him - believed that the Ulema would help in overthrowing the Shah.

The Shah's dependence on the United States, his close ties with Israel and his regime's ill-considered economic policies fuelled the protests. The spark that would ignite the fires of the Iranian revolution would come soon.

## Events of the Iranian Revolution

- On the night of October 23, 1977, Mostafa Khomeini, the eldest son of Ayatollah Khomeini, passed away under mysterious circumstances. Although the reasons for his death were cited as

a heart attack, the people believed he was murdered by the Government Secret Service, SAVAK. This only fuelled the Khomeini image and incited further protests.

- On 7 January 1978, an article published in the national newspaper denounced the Ayatollah as a 'British Agent'. His outraged supporters took to the streets in the city of Qom.
- In the ensuing clash with the police, as per government sources, 2 protesters were killed. But the government opposition sources said about 70 were killed and 500 were injured.
- The funerals of the deceased were used as a flashpoint for wider protests against the Shah's regime. Hundreds of thousands would gather in protest during funeral processions.
- With further protests breaking out in the country and the government responding with fatal retaliations, the Iranian revolution began to gather momentum at an alarming phase. The protests were coordinated by the Ayatollah from his exile in France.
- The government forces being unable to repress the revolution, the Shah of Iran fled the country in January 1979. The armed forces declared their neutrality as a result and effectively ended the rule of the Shah.
- On February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran to a rapturous welcome from the common citizens.
- On 11 February 1979, guerrillas and rebel troops overwhelmed troops loyal to the Shah in armed street fighting, bringing Khomeini to official power.
- On April 1, 1979 following overwhelming support in a national referendum, Khomeini declared Iran, an Islamic republic.
- The various factions of the Iranian revolution including the leftists, secularists, nationalists and intellectuals were sidelined by the clergy in the new regime. Thus, a return to conservative social values was enforced.
- Throughout 1979 the Revolutionary Guards liquidated any and all political groups that opposed Ayatollah and the clergy.
- Western cultural influence was suppressed, and a new constitution created on a religious theocratic government based on Khomeini's vision of velāyat-e faqīh (Persian for "governance of the jurist") and gave sweeping powers to the 'rahbar', or leader; the first 'rahbar' was Khomeini himself.

## Impact of the Iranian Revolution

- The Iranian revolution, from a religious aspect, led to a Shia revival which would counter and uproot Sunni hegemony in the Middle East.
- The new regime led to several changes in relation dynamics on the international stage. The United States put a slew of sanctions that threatened the economy. Iran adopted an anti-Israeli stance and began supporting militant groups that were against Israel.
- The success of the anti-monarchist Iranian revolution alarmed the countries of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Especially when the Iranian leaders called for the overthrow of the monarchies of these three countries.
- Iraq would invade Iran in 1980, supported financially by the Gulf states. However, the populace of Iran rallied behind their new government and the war would end in a stalemate.
- The Iranian Revolution helped in the establishment of Hezbollah, a Shia paramilitary group that is a major faction in the Lebanese Civil War.
- The current regime of Iran has also allegedly supported the Houthi rebels of Yemen in the ongoing Yemen Civil War.
- The Iranian Revolution ultimately established Iran as a major regional power.
- Domestically, the views of the impact of the revolution differ, while some believed that the revolution was a profound and significant event, while some Iranian felt that “in promise of heaven... hell on earth was created”.
- Internally, Iran has had some success in recent years in the broadening of education and health care for the poor, and elimination of American influence in the government.
- Criticisms have been raised with regard to political freedom, governmental honesty and efficiency, economic equality and self-sufficiency, or even popular religious devotion.

## Conclusion

The criticism that the Iranian revolution promised heaven, but created a hell on earth, is not without grounds. It was hoped that a resurgent Iranian republic with a bolstered economy and democratic

values would be a counterbalance to global powers. What instead happened was a bolstering of extremism and orthodoxy.

Now 43 years later, Iran is under serious, global and domestic pressure. Despite converting challenges into opportunities in many sectors such as education; social discontent is steadily climbing.

The Iranian government, while countering the United States hostile policies, will have to fix its system by tackling corruption, hold government departments accountable and rethink their approach towards dissent and personal freedoms.

Also, the U.S. should understand that given Iran's influence in the region it can be a useful ally for the forging of stability in the wider Middle East, especially with regard to the conflicts in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen

