

# Revolutionary Religion: Shia Islam and the Iranian Revolution

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## Revolutionary Religion: Shia Islam and the Iranian Revolution

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The Iranian revolution of 1979 saw a mass movement of diverse interests and political groups within Iranian society come together to overthrow the Shah. This would eventually lead to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in April 1979 and the creation of a new constitution that December. However, the movement to depose the Shah and the movement driving the construction of a new political system in Iran constituted two separate movements. As Moghadam (2002:1137) argues, 'Iran had two revolutions...the populist revolution...[and] the Islamic revolution'. In this essay, I will focus on the 'populist revolution' and the extent to which it can be labelled Islamic. This focus on the first revolution is important, as its nature is contested (Kurzman, 1995; Sohrabi, 2018). In contrast, the second revolution was undeniably Islamic: the successful referendum on the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the creation of an Islamic constitution and the enshrinement of Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader of Iran all support this notion. Thus, my essay will consider to what extent we can label the 'populist revolution' as Islamic. It will be argued that it is appropriate to use this label, as the revolution utilised the narrative and organisational structure of Shi'a Islam to build a mass movement powerful enough to overthrow the Shah (Nasr, 2007; Richard, 1995; Roy, 1994). However, the socioeconomic conditions and existing political movements which fostered a climate of change were secular in nature (Ahmineh and Eisenstadt, 2007; Kamrava, 1990; Abrahamian, 1982). Therefore, it is appropriate to label the Iranian revolution of 1979 as Islamic, yet we must recognise that it originated from secular demands. This essay will demonstrate the above argument by examining Iran's history of protest, considering the economic and political context of the 1979 revolution and evaluating the role that Ali Shariati's actions and ideas had on the revolution. The final section will examine the role that Shi'a Islam played in the revolution, focusing on the symbolic power of Karbala (Fischer, 2003).

### Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Revolution and Reform

To demonstrate the extent to which the Iranian revolution was Islamic, it is necessary to situate the 1979 revolution within Iran's long history of protest. This section will show that the Iranian revolution was Islamic, due to the role played by the Shi'a clergy in supporting the revolution. In contrast, previous uprisings have failed because the clergy either opposed calls for change or remained neutral in such situations. To survey the history of Iran from its foundation to the present day would be an overwhelming task to undertake, with Axworthy (2013:xix, emphasis mine) writing that 'Iranian history can be seen as a microcosm of human history as a whole: empires, invasions, *revolutions*'. Thus, I will focus on Iran's revolutionary history and examine whether the protests that preceded the 1979 revolution can be considered Islamic and what this tells us about the events in 1979.

Iran's constitutional revolution took place between 1905-1911, with a mass movement of people demanding the end of arbitrary rule by the state alongside economic modernisation. This provides us with an historical parallel to the revolution of 1979, which sought similar political and economic objectives (Katouzian, 2011:764). The constitutional revolution also "brought about the official recognition of the ulema as a part of Iran's governing elite for the first time" (Moazami, 2011:73). It was this series of events, then, that would place the ulema (religious clergy) in a position of power within the state apparatus, a significant factor when considering the role that the ulema would play in the 1979 revolution. In his thorough analysis of the causes of the constitutional revolution, Abrahamian (1979) outlines the importance of both the dire economic circumstances in Iran at the time and the cohesive movement against the

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despotic figures of the Qajar family. Again, the combination of an economic crisis and a failing, autocratic leader is a parallel we can observe in both the 1905 and 1979 revolutions. Of equal importance is how the constitutional revolution managed to gather a cohesive movement to challenge the state, rallying around “traditional concepts of social justice and emotional symbols derived from the Shi’i heritage – especially from the martyrdom of Husayn and his family” (ibid:413). These symbols were also central to the 1979 revolution, as will be shown in the final section of this essay. In many ways, the 1905 revolution both mirrored and foreshadowed the 1979 revolution: both revolutions were rooted in economic and political crisis, and both revolutionary movements used the symbols of Shi’a Islam to challenge authority. These two factors are crucial in understanding the 1979 revolution, as they demonstrate that the revolution was not rooted in Islam but came to be expressed through Islam. Thus, both revolutions can be considered Islamic.

In direct contrast to the popular revolution of 1905-11, the Shah’s ‘White Revolution’ of 1963-78 was imposed from above with the aim of preventing a popular revolution that would demand significant political and economic change. Indeed, Ansari (2001:2) describes the White Revolution as “a bloodless revolution from above...anticipating and preventing what many considered to be the danger of a bloody revolution from below”. The Shah’s attempts at reforms were successful in their creation of a growing middle class; such reforms, however, alienated the ulema by targeting landowners (which the ulema tended to be). In a state in which Shi’a Islam provided the only safe form of protest, due to the Shah’s crackdown on dissent, this would prove crucial when considering the extent to which the 1979 revolution was facilitated by the ulema (Kamali, 1997:179). Furthermore, the Shah failed to garner support for his reforms because he could not draw on the symbols and language of Shi’a Islam. As Ansari (2001:2) states, “the message [of the White Revolution] was constructed from symbols and values unfamiliar to most of his domestic constituents”. The White Revolution of 1963-78 sowed the seeds of the events of 1979. The Shah’s attempts at reform effectively represent what the 1979 revolution railed against: undemocratic secular Westernisation. Crucially, the White Revolution targeted the ulema without removing their institutional power (Moazami, 2011). This action set the Shah against the ulema and the ulema firmly on the side of the people. Defined in its opposition to the White Revolution, the 1979 revolution was Islamic in both its message and the actors which came to lead it.

## Economic and Political Contexts of the Iranian Revolution

The first section of this essay demonstrated the importance of religious support in the 1979 revolution, particularly in comparison to the failed White Revolution of 1963. This section will show, however, that the 1979 revolution was not initially an Islamic revolution. It is important to note the economic and political factors that drove the Iranian people to revolt, as well as the many secular groups who played an influential role in securing the success of the revolution. This is crucial in understanding the nuanced nature of the 1979 revolution and why it cannot be oversimplified as only an Islamic revolution. Although the events of 1979 became an Islamic revolution, they were initially concerned with economic and political change as represented by secular groups.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 came about as a direct consequence of the Shah’s failed White Revolution of 1963. The White Revolution had created a great deal of economic uncertainty within the country, whilst the Shah’s increased use of SAVAK to quash political dissent left the Iranian people without a voice. Indeed, Amineh and Eisenstadt (2007:131) argue that the White Revolution satisfied no section of Iranian society and angered a majority of the population instead. This notion is also supported by the protests of 1963, which made both Khomeini’s name famous and indicated early discontent with the Shah’s reforms (Buchan, 2013). In addition, further protests occurred in 1975 which, although unsuccessful, forced the Shah to show his authoritarian tendencies in action (Parsa, 2011:54). These demonstrations were mirrored three years later, in protests that sparked the Iranian Revolution (Kurzman, 2003:293). The protests in 1963 and 1975 were composed of both religious and secular actors and are recognised as such. The 1979 revolution likewise consisted of diverse factions yet is considered ‘Islamic’. The next section considers why this is the case.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 is inextricably linked with the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini. Yet, “the revolution was begun by secular progressive forces with the goals of democracy and political freedoms, social justice, and independence” (Rahnema, 2011:43). So, one must consider how the Iranian revolution came to be known as the Islamic revolution. This is partially because some scholars fail to differentiate between the removal of the Shah and

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the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran as two separate events; as Moghadam (2002:1137) labels them, the 'populist' and 'Islamic' revolutions, respectively. The same scholars also tend to associate the Iranian revolution with the Islamisation of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (Moazami, 2009:61). Yet, the perception of the 1979 revolution as Islamic is not solely the fault of selective historiography. Rather, the death of the Iranian left's leading figure before the revolution began, and the disunity of the left during the revolution, meant that the left came to be overshadowed by Khomeini. To demonstrate the role of secular forces in the Iranian revolution it is crucial to consider first, the factionalism of the Iranian left, and secondly, the role and legacy of Ali Shariati.

## The Failure of the Iranian Left: Factionalism and Repression

The Iranian left in the late 1970s were divided over the aims of any potential revolution. As Cronin (2000:236) writes, "to some, the Tudeh and the Fadaiyan majority, the anti-imperialism of the new regime was of paramount importance...to other elements on the Left, for example the Fadaiyan minority and the Paykar...the lack of economic change was decisive". Greason (2005) argues that such sectarian divisions were not restricted to an Iranian context but common to the international left. Still, these divisions were perhaps avoidable. The disunity of the left immediately before and during the Iranian revolution was exacerbated by the Shah's repression of their organisations. As Shahidian (1994:226) describes the situation, "the left faced the approaching revolution in a weakened condition: most of its leaders had been killed...the rank and file were young and inexperienced". This lack of leadership is partly related to the death of Ali Shariati, who will be discussed in the next section. Yet, it is important to evaluate the widespread, repressive measures of the Shah before we consider the role of this influential individual.

After the rapid implementation of economic reforms known as the 'White Revolution', workers and trade unions voiced their opposition to the Shah through strikes and protests. Rasler (1996:146) writes that, "in response to the rising waves of strikes and demonstrations [of 1978], the Shah...imposed military government". It should be noted that this was not the first repressive measure the Shah enforced which damaged the left. Mazaheri (2006:404) states that "while politically the state had operated in a two-party system...in March 1975 the Shah liquidated the two and established...a "legitimate" political party in order to disguise his increasingly fascist style of rule". The Iranian left, therefore, could not succeed in either parliament or on the streets. Yet, the left were not the only subjects of repression. Arguably even more important to the revolution of 1979 was the repression of the Iranian middle class merchants or 'bazaari'. Despite past examples of the bazaari's political power, as demonstrated in the Tobacco Revolts of the 1890s, the Shah sought to enforce price controls on the merchant class. Furthermore, all bazaaris were forced to donate to the Shah's political party (Bashiriyeh, 2011). Thus, not only had the Shah repressed the political left but he had also pursued the repression of the middle classes. This left only the religious establishment as a vehicle for revolution. Therefore, the Iranian revolution may have been 'Islamic' but only because the secular demands of the 1979 were translated into Islamic terms. Alongside the widespread repression of this period, the targeted repression of Ali Shariati is also important if we are to understand why non-religious groups failed to lead the revolution.

## A Leader Lost? The Role of Ali Shariati

As noted earlier in this essay, the popular perception of the Iranian revolution is of a religious vanguard led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Yet, scholars such as Nasr (2007) and Keddie (1982) argue that the Iranian revolution's emergence was not due to the leadership of Khomeini but to the ideas of Ali Shariati. The imprisonment and subsequent death of Shariati deprived the Iranian left of a powerful leader and meant that a revolution which followed his ideas failed to materialise. This section will demonstrate both the effect Shariati's death had on the left, and how Shariati's ideas encapsulate the syncretic ideology of the Iranian revolution.

Although academics such as Abedi (1986:229) label Shariati "the architect" of the Iranian revolution, it is perhaps more accurate to place Shariati alongside Khomeini as one of the "two intellectual pillars" of the revolution (Mahdavi, 2014:25). Indeed, we should not ignore the fact that Khomeini successfully led the 1979 revolution. Yet, it is important to consider how Shariati's death rendered the left without leadership. In 1978, a year after Shariati died, "the workers movement...were organising strikes, go slows initially for minor economic demands, gradually becoming more political...[yet] the left had *no clear leadership* and remained subordinate to the Islamist movement" (Mather

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and Mather, 2002:181, emphasis mine). The left, then, were still an active force, but faced a leadership vacuum. Partly, this is due to the widespread repression of secular, leftist movements by the Shah. This is also due to the targeted repression of Shariati, who had been imprisoned frequently since as early as 1957 and who was forced into exile until he died (Abedi, 1986). It is worth noting that Khomeini was also forced into exile but since the mosques and the ulema were not repressed to the extent that the left was, it was simple for Khomeini to return (Corboz, 2015:224). Not only did Shariati's death leave the Iranian left without a charismatic leader to organize around, the loss of Shariati also meant that the various factions of the Iranian left indulged in abstract theorising instead of strategic action. As Mather and Mather (2002:187) describe the situation: "a religious approach to Marxism led to endless discussions on abstract concepts...an obsession with debates surrounding the Russian Revolution, disrespect for independent actions of the working class, an illusion that the vanguard knows more than all others, were all symptomatic [of the left]". Thus, not only did the loss of Shariati exacerbate the organisational woes of a repressed Iranian left, but the divergence from Shariati's ideas rendered the left irrelevant in a revolutionary moment. This meant that, despite the causes of the revolution not deriving from religious factors, Khomeini's religious movement had neither effective nor attractive opposition to stop them from monopolising the events of 1979. Having shown the negative impact of Shariati's death on the Iranian left, it is important to examine Shariati's ideology and its relationship to the 1979 revolution. This is crucial to understand if we are to fully comprehend the revolutionary potential of Shi'a Islam, which will be the subject of the final section of this essay.

Ali Shariati's thought has been described as "a radical...democratic and progressive version of Islam" (Keddie, 1982:290). Despite the inherently Islamic nature of Shariati's philosophy, he argued against "not only monarchs and kings but also the Iranian ulema possessing and exercising power over the people" (Paşaoğlu, 2013:112). Thus, Shariati was a politically active Muslim yet not an Islamist. Rather, Ali Shariati was the leading exponent of what Saffari (2017:289) labels "Shi'i liberation theology"; Shariati's belief was that Allah was on the side of the poor, and opposed the structural injustice created by man. Ali Shariati was by no means the first to interpret Shi'a Islam in this way, as Muhammad Nakhshab argued for this interpretation many years earlier (ibid:293). However, Shariati was the pre-eminent figure in this tradition as political unrest began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As both a prominent leader within the Iranian left and a theologian on the side of the oppressed, Shariati's ideas were viewed as dangerous and so, Ali Shariati was imprisoned and exiled. Yet, Shariati's legacy was clear to see in the events of 1979. Not only were pictures of Shariati carried during the revolution, but Shariati's ideas fuelled the revolution: "his popular writings and speeches...inspired a generation of idealist youth who would go on to rally behind Khomeini" (Gholizadeh and Hook, 2012:177). Thus, the Iranian revolution of 1979 was inspired by Shariati's liberation theology, itself a school of thought within Islam. Shariati's ideology reflects both the economic and political context of the revolution and the Islamic solution to these woes. However, Shariati's philosophy was not implemented by Khomeini after the revolution. This section has shown that it is accurate to label the 1979 revolution Islamic because Islam can be interpreted in a revolutionary way. The final section of my essay will demonstrate how Islam was not only interpreted as revolutionary but how the integral role of Islam within Iranian society meant that it was the only realistic conduit for revolutionary change.

## Shi'a Islam: Conduit of Revolution?

As most other avenues for protest and anger had been repressed during the early 1970s, the mosques of Shi'a Islam and the clergy who ran them were the only forums for any Iranian citizen dissatisfied with the Shah. Richard (1995:80) describes the situation as thus: "the clerics used the mosque as headquarters for the revolutionary committees, distribution centre for essential goods...and centre for popular mobilisation". In terms of organisational structure and power, then, the ulema of Iran played a vital role. This section of my essay will fully elaborate the role that the ulema played, using a resource-mobilisation approach to the study of revolution, as well considering the symbolic power of Shi'a Islam. The discussion surrounding the role of the ulema in the 1979 revolution is vital to answering the question of how Islamic the Iranian revolution was. It will be shown that the demands of the population were not strongly related to Islam, but that Islam allowed these demands to be voiced and thus became the dominant factor in the revolution.

In stark contrast to the repression of both the Iranian left and the middle class bazaaris of 1970s Iran, the Shi'a ulema were broadly untouched by the Shah's repressive measures. Thus, as Fischer (2003:185) argues, "what produced

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the Islamic form of the revolution was not Islamic revivalism so much as repression of other modes of political discourse". This evasion of repression meant that "[the ulema] had greater resources in four areas: ideology, manpower, organisation and leadership" (Moshiri, 1991:118). Indeed, Moshiri (ibid) argues that a basic resource-mobilisation approach to revolutions demonstrates that the organisation or group with the most resources will inevitably come to lead the revolution. Seeberg (2014:492) echoes this view, yet also notes that the lack of military interference allowed the ulema to co-opt the revolution. Foran (1992:14) attributes the lack of military repression to the Shah's close alliance with the Carter administration, which pushed a "human rights oriented foreign policy". This relaxation of repression came too late for secular, leftist movements yet allowed the ulema to lead the revolution without any considerable backlash. Both the institutional protection the ulema benefited from and the extensive resources they had explains why the ulema were able to lead the revolution. Yet, we must also consider why they desired to lead the revolution.

In previous crises, such as the 1953 coup against democratically-elected Mossadegh, the ulema had sided with authority (in this case, the U.S.A) rather than popular opinion (Amjad, 1989:43). Therefore, we must consider why the ulema sided with the revolutionaries in 1979. Berberoglu (2001:306) argues that the ulema joined, and eventually led, the Iranian revolution simply because the Shah's economic reforms had redistributed wealth away from the religious establishment. This argument shows that the factors driving the 1979 revolution were not Islamic but fundamentally economic, even for ulema who sought to present the revolution as an "Islamic struggle" (Gholizadeh and Hook, 2012:177). Yet, to argue that the role of the ulema was driven solely by economic anxiety is simplistic and ignores the revolutionary potential of Shi'a Islam. It is accurate to suggest that the ulema became the leaders of the revolution because they were relatively untouched by a repressive Shah and had an organisational structure conducive to bringing about widespread change. However, much as the ulema co-opted the revolution, they also presented the revolution as the fulfilment of Islamic history and belief (Roy, 1994:168). Despite the reality that the ulema manipulated a revolutionary movement rather than created one, the clergy of Iran were able to unify fragmented revolutionary factions via the national religion of Shi'a Islam. The next section will demonstrate how religious occasions and imagery were utilised by the ulema to present the 1979 revolution as Islamic.

## *Revolutionary Islam and 'The Karbala Paradigm'*

Thus far, this essay has demonstrated that the Iranian revolution was caused by economic and political factors unrelated from the ulema, but that the organisational power of the ulema allowed them to make their revolution their own. This was also due to the repression of the left and the loss of Ali Shariati who, alongside Ayatollah Khomeini, was a prospective leader of the revolution. However, the ulema did not come to lead the revolution simply because of its organisational power; the symbolism of Shi'a Islam allowed the ulema to truly make the revolution 'Islamic' despite its secular origins. This final section of the essay will present and evaluate the revolutionary symbolism of Shi'a Islam, focusing on "the Karbala paradigm" – the notion that Shi'a Islam was founded through revolutionary struggle and has emphasised this theme ever since (Fischer, 2003:xvii).

Although infrequent protests had been common in Iran throughout the 1970s, revolutionary movements had lacked structure and organisation. The ulema provided a structure to the revolution, as it staged protests exactly forty days after protesters had been killed. This began on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1978, followed by more protests on 18<sup>th</sup> February, 29<sup>th</sup> March, 10<sup>th</sup> May and so on, until such protests garnered sufficient momentum to warrant sustained action. These actions followed a particular structure as forty days was the traditional duration of mourning after a funeral (Kurzman, 2004:55). The revolution was escalated further to commemorate Ashura, a day devoted to the martyr Husayn Ali (Hussain, 2005). Facing such opposition, the Shah left Iran a month later, in January 1979. Khomeini returned to Iran soon after, at the beginning of February.

It is clear from the chronology of the revolution that the ulema gave disorganised protests a structure, ensuring that revolutionary fervour did not fade away but was instead concentrated on certain days of the Islamic calendar. Yet, the ulema did not have to manipulate the Islamic calendar to its needs, as the rituals and symbolism of Shi'a Islam readily lend themselves to revolution. As Dabashi (2011:314) writes, "the enormous arsenal of Shi'i rebellious symbolism was put to effective political use...mobilized in the service of the revolution against tyranny". The use of Islamic, particularly Shi'a, symbolism in the 1979 revolution demonstrates how the revolution became Islamic without

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being so initially. Such symbols constitute the Karbala paradigm, which we will now turn our attention towards.

The Karbala paradigm refers to a range of symbols and rituals related to the martyrdom of Husayn Ali – the third Imam – at the Battle of Karbala. Nasr (2007:43) neatly describes the importance of Karbala to Shi'a Muslims: "Karbala is an emblem of suffering and solace but also connotes...willingness to challenge illegitimate authority". Hence, the mourning of protesters during 1978 was not simply an occasion to grieve, but an occasion to revolt. This duality of Karbala is due to the context of the initial event itself, when "historical sources all agree that...Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, refused to give his allegiance to Yazid...who was appointed heir to the caliphate by his father" (Hussain, 2005:19). The refusal of Husayn to recognise Yazid, whose succession was controversial due to the unprecedented nature of dynastic rule at this time, is mirrored in the ulema's refusal to recognise the Shah as ruler of Iran. Thus, the ulema used the event of Ashura, when Husayn's martyrdom is commemorated, to escalate the revolution. As Fischer (2003:213) argues, "the most striking illustration of the active interpretation of Karbala was the suspension of traditional mourning processions...[for which] political marches were substituted". This combination of an overarching theme of rebellion with a calendar based around historical examples of resistance allowed the ulema to communicate to the Iranian population a revolutionary message in religious language. Skocpol (1982:275) is correct to state that "Shi'a Islam was both organisationally and culturally crucial to the making of the Iranian Revolution...a very "traditional" part of Iranian life...provided crucial political resources for the forging of a very modern-looking revolutionary movement". Thus, the employment of the Karbala paradigm to unify a mass movement and depose the Shah provides strong evidence for labelling the 1979 revolution as Islamic, even though its initial demands were political and economic rather than religious.

## Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that the Iranian revolution of 1979 can be appropriately labelled as Islamic. Although the demands and unrest that initiated the revolution were political and economic, the Iranian ulema used its position of influence to co-opt the revolution and translate political and economic demands into religious symbolism. The eventual leadership of the revolution was Islamic, due to the institutional power of the ulema and the repression that other organisations had faced. The example of Ali Shariati shows both why the left failed and how the left could have succeeded if it had not been harshly repressed. With the loss of Shariati and the failure of the left, the Iranian ulema represented the only available option for a population which desired revolutionary change. The organisational power of the ulema combined with the rebellious symbolism of Shi'a Islam, particularly the use of the Karbala paradigm, ensured the Islamic nature of an originally secular revolution.

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