

# The Rise and Fall of the 1979 Iranian Revolution: Its Lessons for Today

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## **Achievements**

The February 1979 Iranian revolution was the largest urban mass uprising since the 1917 Russian revolution. It changed that strategic relation of forces in the Middle East to the detriment of imperialism. In 1953, the Shah's regime had been imposed by the CIA coup that overthrew the democratically elected nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh. It overthrew imperialism's regional gendarme, an ally of the colonial-settler state of Israel, and a supporter of South African Apartheid. It dissolved the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a regional anti-Soviet military pact.

After the 1953 defeat of the mass movement, the Shah's regime had gradually consolidate an autocratic capitalist state basis of an imperial Fars (Persian) chauvinist ideology that denied the oppressed nationalities any rights, and increasingly choked off the political life. The February revolution destroyed the monarchy, the historical form of the State in Iran, and badly damaged its repressive and ideological props. Aside from those who were caught by the revolutionary forces, with the royal court almost all the major industrialists and bankers, the military brass and top bureaucrats fled the country, mostly, for the United States.

## **Who led the February revolution?**

No political party or individual led the February revolution. Instead, grassroots organizations in the neighborhoods, workplaces, high schools and universities, and among peasants and oppressed nationalities, and eventually in the armed forces, were formed to challenge the Shah's power structure. Workers began to exert control over workplaces. Peasant moved to take the land they had tilled for centuries; closely tied to this oppressed nationalities began to revive their cultural heritage and exercise autonomy. Universities became centers of political discourse. Neighborhoods were organized through popular committees. Political parties, including the banned communist groups, began to function increasingly openly. Finally, as the discipline in the armed forces began to break and some soldiers went to the side of the revolution, the population armed itself and overthrew the monarchy.

It was entirely possible for Iranians to inaugurate the first workers' government in the Middle East and open the road to socialism.

Instead Ayatollah Khomeini, who had opposed the Shah's pro-imperialist REFORMS programs in 1963 and was subsequently arrested and exiled to Iraq, captured the moment and established himself as the spoke person for the revolution. By 1983, he had used populist demagogy and ruthless repression to suppress all independent mass organizations and practically all political parties to consolidate a theocratic capitalist regime. Thus, he offered a historically reactionary response to imperialism in the Middle East.

## **The Shah's regime and its opponents.**

In Iran the state has been the force behind capitalist industrialization. The Pahlavi monarchy led this effort in the 1930s, and it was resumed soon after the CIA-MI-6 coup of 1953. The pace of capitalist development picked up after the White Revolution in 1963 as it reformed class relations especially in the countryside in order to facilitated capitalist primitive accumulation and ongoing capital accumulation.

The agrarian reform favored a shift of rural surplus funds to capitalist accumulation and rural surplus population to towns where industrialization was underway. The White Revolution contributed to the weakening of the power of the Shiite hierarchy, itself a major landowner and a tax collector, and its traditional allies the Bazaar merchants, who were also part of the traditional absentee landowners. The Shiite hierarchy opposed key planks of the White Revolution, including the land reform, Health and Knowledge Corps (army draftees whose mission was to bring elementary health and literacy campaigns to the countryside), and the extension of the right to vote to women (even though the right to vote itself had little meaning under a dictatorship). Thus, an alliance of Shiite hierarchy, bazaar merchants and sectors of the old landowning classes opposed the Shah's regime.

The Shah's regime was also opposed by social classes and sectors that his own capitalist modernization program had created. Most importantly, this included the proletariat; between 1963 and 1975 the size of the Iranian working class doubled. Millions of the pauperized peasants had become squatters in the large cities, especially Tehran, and came increasingly into conflict with the State apparatus. Finally, the "new middle class" and the intelligencia became the most vocal critiques of the Shah's regime. They also provided most of the cadre for the nationalist, Islamic and socialist forces opposed to the Shah.

### **The bourgeois nationalist parties**

The Iranian capitalist class developed belatedly and dependent either on the State or the imperialist powers, and never cut it's tied to precapitalist social relations. Thus, it was never able to carry a national democratic revolution. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian merchants held Russian citizenship to safeguard their wealth against the Qajar kings. During the course of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, they took refuge from the Qajar autocracy in the British Embassy.

The State sponsored industrialization spurt under the Pahlavi dynasty helped to develop a small layer of industrial and financial capitalists; but they remained subservient to the royal court and the international bourgeoisie.

The period of glory of bourgeois nationalism was limited to brief campaign for nationalization of the oil industry in the early 1950s that was led by Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, who became the prime minister upon popular demand. In a period of the climax of confrontation with the royal court, Fatemi spoke of a republic while Mossadegh limited himself to the notion that "The Shah should rule but not govern." In his confrontation with Britain, Mossadegh sought the support of the World Court and the US administration. When Washington and London joined forces to stage a coup in the summer of 1953, Mossadegh refused to mobilize and arm the masses even after the first coup attempt failed. Three days later a second coup succeeded and a generation of Iranians suffered the consequences.

The National Front, the umbrella organization of the bourgeois nationalist formed around Mossadegh, never attained the same glory. A combination of dictatorship and a lack of a genuine program and strategy for a national democratic revolution fractured it into a half a dozen small sects organized around various personalities. On the eve of the February revolution, Shahpour Bakhtiar, one of the leading National Front figures, accepted to be Shah's offer to become his care taker prime minister. After the triumph of the February revolution, Mehdi Bazargan, another National Front leader who had merge nationalist and Islamic sentiments became Ayatollah Khomeini's interim prime minister. His cabinet was made of assortments of nationalist figures who merely served as a transition belt for the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Bazargan's cabinet was forced out after it was discovered that he had secretly met with the Americans in Algeria in the summer of 1979. A few other Islamic nationalist characters, like Bani Sadre, Ghotb Zadeh and Yazdi, served the Islamic Republic as secular confidants before they were also purged.

Thus, the Iranian bourgeoisie has proved unwilling and incapable of leading a national democratic revolution.

### **The working class and its leaderships.**

The Iranian working class origins includes thousands of oil workers in Baku (annexed in late nineteenth century by the Tsarist Russia) and the early influence of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, especially the Bolsheviks. In 1904, the first Iranian social democratic group (Hemmat) was founded in Transcaucasia. Social Democrats participated in the Constitutional revolution, including, with help of their Russian Social Democrats, in the defense of Tabriz when monarchist forces stage a counter revolution from Tehran. Iranian Social Democrats established links with the leaders of the Second International and helped the Bolsheviks smuggle Iskra into Transcaucasia. In June 1920, after the Bolsheviks called for the formation of the Communist International, Iranian communists held their first party congress and founded the Communist Party of Iran.

During the same period, there were rank-and-file attempts to form trade unions in the few industries that had emerged. Notable was the printers' trade union. However, the political development of the Iranian working class was largely influenced by the communists from the very beginning. This process differed from much of the historical development during Marx and Engels' time and their conception of the developmental trajectory of the working class, beginning with trade union formations. The communist world view entered in Iran before it emerged from the struggles of workers themselves. The existence of autocracy also proved detrimental to the development of trade unions and economic struggles as the pretext to class (political) struggle. Thus, the Communist party was established before any large scale trade unions were attempted. The formation of trade unions or any other workers' organization became the task for communists.

This uneven development proved critical for the history of the Iranian labor movement. By 1930, the Communist party and most of its leadership were destroyed by the combined blows from Reza Shah's dictatorship and the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union. Many communists rotted in Reza Shah's jails, and some, including Otis Sultanzadeh, the party's principal leader and a leader of the Communist International in Lenin's time, were executed during Stalinist purges.

As elsewhere in the world, the degeneration of the Russian revolution and ascendancy of the Stalinist bureaucratic caste destroyed the Bolshevik revolutionary program and strategy. Communist parties were transformed into reformist bureaucratic organizations that blindly followed Moscow's policies.

After the occupation of Iran by the Allies in 1941, with the support of Moscow and the initiative of the Stalinist members of the former Communist party the Tudeh (masses) party was organized as a Popular Front, anti-fascist organization. The party became more similar to the typical Stalinist parties after the Cold War began; That is, the Tudeh party has never had a socialist program and strategy. Instead, like other Stalinist parties in semi-colonial and colonial world it has pursued strategic alliance with the "national bourgeoisie" who it has claimed will lead a national democratic revolution.

The Tudeh party's influence on the Iranian working class has been disastrous. The leadership of the Central Council of the United Trade Unions of Iranian Workers and Toilers, which it came to control in 1946, was entirely imposed by the party and made up of key party cadre who were from the Iranian elite, not the working class. The Tudeh party used its influence in the labor movement to bargain with the capitalist regime. It put down militant labor strikes, including of oil workers in Aghajari, when it believed it was possible to wrestle concessions from the government. This is how Tudeh party was offered three ministerial posts in the reactionary Qavam cabinet in 1946. These policies mirrored Moscow's own: to please Roosevelt and Churchill, Stalin pulled out the Red Army from Azerbaijan. This made it possible for the Shah's advancing army to overthrow the pro-Soviet government of Pishvari.

The Tudeh party advocated oil concessions in the northern portions of Iran for Moscow when the government was considering oil concessions in the south for the West. The Tudeh party did not join the fight for nationalization of the Iranian oil industry led by Mossadegh. It also did not use its significant influence in the army to fight the CIA led coup of 1953. When the coup succeeded, its most committed militants were given to the firing squads. Not surprisingly, the Tudeh party never regained its standing with the Iranian workers again.

With the Sino-Soviet rift the exiled Tudeh party leadership also suffered a split. The various Maoist groups that emerged were not essentially different in their program and strategy. Like the Tudeh, they all hoped for a “national bourgeois” force to lead the national democratic revolution. Meanwhile, after 1963 Moscow, and later Beijing established good relations with the Shah that lasted until his overthrow by the February 1979 revolution.

During the 1960s, a layer of the youth influenced by the Cuban and Algerian revolutions split off from the National Front and from the Tudeh party. They formed the Mujahedin-e Khaleq (People’s Mujahedin) and the Fedayeen-e Khaleq (People’s Fedayeen) respectively. These were anti-dictatorship and anti-imperialist urban guerrilla forces. Despite the sincerity of its original leaders, these organizations tried to substitute the reformism of bourgeois nationalist and the Tudeh party with heroic armed actions and determination to struggle. They lacked any mass action program and strategy for social change. Thus, they remained vulnerable to the more sophisticated Stalinist forces. The Mujahedin suffered a Maoist split in early the 1970s. The Fedayeen were split by the pressure from the Tudeh party after 1979. The guerrilla movement itself was quickly militarily defeated by the Shah’s repressive apparatus and was soon politically superseded by the mass movement of working people who made the February 1979 revolution.

After the 1953 coup, Stalinist and centrist political forces had little direct contact and influence in the labor movement. Meanwhile, the quickening pace of industrialization doubled the size of the labor force and gave it a measure of power in relationship to employers. At the same time, intensification of dictatorship limited trade union development and institutionalized economic struggle. These factors combined contributed to the development of the mass working class movement in 1978-79 and after.

The events of 1978-79 showed that in the relative absence of Stalinist and centrist parties workers can display an amazing capacity for organization and action even under a system of dictatorship. Thus, Iranian workers with no prior strike experience formed formidable strike committees. Iranian workers with no experience in workers’ control developed workers’ councils and took charge of their work places. Even during the counter-revolutionary offensive of the summer of 1979, workers councils were being formed and organized into regional and national networks.

These could have developed further and a class struggle working class leadership could have emerged in due time to pose the perspective for a workers and peasant government. However, by 1983, all workers’ councils were destroyed or substituted by corporatist Islamic Shoras (councils) of Labor and the Workers’ House.

### **The Islamic Republic as counterrevolution.**

The historical weakness of the national bourgeoisie and crisis of leadership of the working class provided a vacuum in 1978-79, which Ayatollah Khomeini filled. A resolute opponent of the Shah, Khomeini and his allies were negotiating a peaceful transfer of power to keep the capitalist order intact. Behind the scene negotiations, which included Washington, settled on a government headed by National Front figures to take over the power from the Shah. What motivated these negotiations was the common fear of a proletarian revolution. However, Shahpour Bakhtiar, the National Front figure chosen by the Shah as

the caretaker prime minister decided to remain at the helm. Meanwhile, a section of the army brass that was routing for a blood bath decided on a military coup. The show down with the masses led to the February 19-21 armed insurrections.

Thus, in the actual reality the power fell in the hands of the grassroots organizations that had no common perspective for the future. However, the bulk of bourgeois nationalist and petty bourgeois parties, including the Tudeh party, most Maoist groups, Fedayeen and Mujahedin, supported Khomeini's bid for power. Khomeini's Revolution Council that was set up to take the power from Shah-Bakhtiar proposed a provisional government headed by Mehdi Bazargan and staffed with National Front figures. The provisional government itself had no mass base and was drew its legitimacy from Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus, Khomeini-Bazargan government, on one hand, and the grassroots organizations that sprang out of the revolutionary struggle, on the other hand, produced a situation of de facto dual power.

From the first day after the February victory Khomeini's designated government pursued policies to resolve this duality of power by undermining the grassroots organizations that held the potential of for a proletarian revolution.

A necessarily limited chronology has to suffice. Pro-Khomeini forces arrived soon after the liberation of the State-run TV and radio stations (there were and are no others) to take it over and impose a censorship that excluded among other things socialist points of view. Soon all news and information deemed "non-Islamic" were censored and staff that did not cooperate were fired. Within a few days after the insurrection, Khomeini issued a decree to disarm the neighborhood defense committees and forced top-down Islamic armed squads that were based in mosques. When these tightly controlled Islamic squads proved inadequate to control the mass movement, some in the Shiite hierarchy recruited youth from the urban poor into semi-fascist Hezbollah squads. These were used to attack demonstrations and political or social groups. Just before the International Women's Day, Khomeini issued a decree requiring women to wear the Islamic garb. Hezbollah goons attacked the women's March 8 march with chains, sticks and knives. During the Iranian New Year at the end of March, the air force bombed Turkeman regions on the south east of the Caspian Sea where peasants were taking over the land and the Turkeman established a cultural center. On the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Iranian New Year (in April), Khomeini staged an undemocratic referendum in which the population was given the choice of continuing with the monarchy which they had just overthrown or an undefined Islamic Republic. The voters reject monarchy by an over 90% majority; Khomeini and his allies claimed that such huge majority actually wanted an Islamic Republic—which at time was just a slogan empty of content. He then used the vote to exclude all non-Islamic groups from the legal political discourse. In April, a mass circulation daily, Ayandegan, which was critical of Khomeini, was shut down by force. This was followed by a war waged against the Kurdish people who have been struggling for self-determination for decades. At the same time, armed Hezbollah gangs were used to ransack headquarters of socialist parties and 40 news papers were shut down. Meanwhile, Khomeini decided that instead of a democratic constituent assembly based on grassroots organizations that had issued from the revolution, an Islamic Assembly of Experts should write a constitution for the Islamic Republic he had rubber stamped in the March referendum.

By all appearances, the reactionary offensive of summer of 1979 had consolidated the Islamic Republic and all opposition parties were driven underground. However when a select group of pro-Khomeini students took over the US embassy in October, streets of Tehran and other cities were once again filled with millions of anti-imperialist demonstrators. Open political activity revived. Once again, the workers showed the way forward. United workers' councils led several mass demonstrations in Tehran and elsewhere. Workers' councils that sprang up in individual factories had learned that in order to manage their workplaces they need to link up with other workers' council within the same industry, region or industrial group. This posed the problem of working class management of the economy and society and the need for a workers' government. Peasant councils were also formed and some linked up with others and land occupations were underway.

What was necessary was a working class leadership to link up these class-specific demands with the anti-imperialist movement and the defense of democratic and political freedoms through the expansion of the already existing grassroots organizations, in particular workers and peasant councils; this would have created a workers and peasants government. Only such a government, like the one that issued from the October 1917 revolution, and subsequently in Cuba after 1959, could have charted a consistent anti-imperialist, that is, anti-capitalist and socialist course. History has produced no other alternatives.

Such leadership did not exist. Instead, Stalinist and centrist parties were essentially divided into two camps. A group best exemplified by the Tudeh party and Fedayeen Majority argued that the conflict with imperialism and monarchism required political support for the “anti-imperialist” Khomeini regime. Others such as the Mujahedin and Fedayeen Minority countered that Khomeini is the gravest danger facing the revolution. Thus, they each looked for an alternative force within the Islamic Republic and in the bourgeois political spectrum for their opposition to Khomeini. President Bani-Sadre temporarily provided one such a bourgeois figure for this opposition. In practice, each of these two camps subordinated actual class struggle to their perceived need to either politically support or to militarily confront the Islamic Republic.

Take the case of the workers’ council movement. In the spring of 1980, the Islamic Republic party began to systematically organize and use Islamic Associations in workplaces to divide the work force into “followers of Imam (Khomeini)” and those who were not prepared to pledge allegiance to him. The same scheme was used to split workers’ councils and establish the corporatist Islamic Councils of Labor. This scheme not only split the working class according to workers’ religious or ideological belief, it also created organizations of workers with the explicit goal of supporting the capitalist regime and its management in the State sector of the economy which has been extensive thanks to expropriations. Further, this policy created tensions and conflicts among workers, which allowed management and State officials to intervene. After the start of the war workers resistance to these and any other capitalist policies were labeled as “counter-revolutionary.”

The Tudeh party and Fedayeen Majority asked their membership to identify themselves as Moslems and “followers of Imam.” They even joined noon prayers at workplaces. The Mujahedin and Fedayeen Minority and others who placed open struggle against Khomeini quickly came against a still substantial section of the work force that still harbored illusions in Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. These groups were quickly isolated given that they had no proposal for uniting workers as a revolutionary class. Their followers in factories were quickly fired or were forced to operate secretly.

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran. Khomeini called this “a divine present.” He and the Islamic Republic began an offensive to destroy the grassroots organizations and political parties. Workplaces, especially factories, were militarized. All workers’ protests against the management or the State were called “counter-revolutionary.” Soon after the war began, Khomeini heeded the demand by Ayatollah Golpaigani and Ayatollah Marraashi, too archconservative Shiite leaders, to discard a modest land reform bill in the Islamic parliament. Landowners went on an offensive against peasants. Socialists and others who did not agree with the Islamic Republic but wanted to participate in the defense of the revolution against Saddam Hussein’s army were expelled from the fronts. Meanwhile, Iraqi army destroyed the oil industry in the south, thereby damaging the strongest section of the Iranian proletariat, the oil workers. In the villages, the Iraqi army executed members of the peasant councils.

Meanwhile, imperialist and monarchist terrorism provided additional opportunity for the regime to clamp down on political freedoms. The failure of socialist currents to join the fight against imperialist and monarchist terrorism and increasingly systematic State repression undermined independent working class organization and action.

In the summer of 1981, under blows from the Islamic Republic the Mujahedin leadership decided to stage an “armed insurrection.” This putsch failed quickly. The government used it to justify a murderous campaign to physically destroy the Mujahedin and armed centrist groups such as the Fedayeen Minority. The Tudeh party and Fedayeen Majority helped the authorities in identifying and persecuting these groups whose members and sympathizers were routinely imprisoned, tortured and in the summer of 1981, executed. As a result, Mujahedin and Fedayeen Minority and other centrist groups retreated to Kurdistan, which still was not under the full control of the Islamic Republic. Most these groups eventually splintered and no significant organization remains today. The exception is the Mujahedin who have built a cult organization in the service of imperialism (French and later American) and then organized an armed unit of several thousands to attack Iran from Iraq at the pleasure of Saddam Hussein.

After dealing a decisive blow to the labor movement, the Mujahedin and centrist groups, all with complicity of the Tudeh party and Fedayeen Majority, the government turned against them. Late in 1982, the government arrested the bulk of Tudeh leadership and some of the Fedayeen Majority leadership. Some were tortured and executed, others appeared on the State television to denounce Marxism, explain how they spied for the Soviet Union, and praise Khomeini and the Islamic Republic.

The combination of these Stalinist betrayals and centrist policies disoriented workers and the youth that facilitated capitalist attacks on the labor and mass movement. These led to demoralization a generation of youth and working class fighters well before the Soviet bloc collapsed.

By 1983, all grassroots organizations and socialist political currents were effectively destroyed in Iran. Khomeini pursued the fratricidal war with Iraq even after the Iranian army and volunteers had effectively driven the invading forces out in the spring of 1982. The war continued until 1988 when both sides were exhausted and over a million were killed or maimed. After 1988, the Islamic Republic began a massive economic offensive against the working class that continues to this date.

### **Lessons for today.**

The 1979 Iranian revolution could be gainfully compared to the 1917 Russian revolution. In both revolutions workers and peasants brought down autocratic monarchies. Although the Bolsheviks’ influence had indirectly prepared the workers, the February revolution in both countries triumphed without leadership of any individual or party. In both revolution grassroots organizations of workers and peasants were formed: The Soviets in Russia and the workers’ councils and other popular councils in Iran. Here the similarities end.

In Russia, Lenin recognized that proletarian character of the revolutionary process and educated and mobilized the Bolshevik party to fight for a government of the commune-type based on the soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants deputies. In Iran, the Stalinist and centrist parties, much like the Mensheviks in the Russian revolution, called for support to the capitalist Islamic republic or other bourgeois forces within or outside of it (or organized their own sectarian, sometimes armed, campaigns). These class collaborationist and sectarian policies were decisive in the defeat of the working class and the revolution.

Unfortunately, the experience of the Iranian revolution is not unique. As noted, similar policies defeated the mass upsurge in Iran from 1945-53. Dozens of revolutions in the industrial capitalist countries and in the periphery have suffered a similar fate. With the demise of the Soviet power and the rise of the Stalinist bureaucratic caste, the Bolshevik program, strategy and tradition was buried in favor of a new doctrine suitable to the conservative new elite. These policies were imposed on the young Communist parties and those communists who opposed them were violently purged, sometimes murdered. Thus, the communist movement was defeated as a mass movement by the end of 1920s.

The Marxian theory of socialism seeks human emancipation through self-organization and self-activity of the proletariat as the ruling class. This is also what Lenin stresses in his *State and Revolution*. The fundamental lesson of the Iranian revolution is to return to this long lost treasure of working class and socialist movements: to critically re-appropriate the Bolshevik legacy (which includes Trotsky's) in light of what Marx and Engles left us from their critical appropriation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century struggle for socialism.

Marx's legacy is an open system and the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have to tackle new problems, most importantly the fight to re-appropriate nature in theory and practice as the basis of our humanity and a fundamental plank of Marxian socialism. However, to tackle new problems, it is imperative that we find the courage to learn from previous defeats and to revise the theory and tradition that has contributed to our victories.

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