

COVER STORY

INSIDE KHOMEINI'S IRAN

Heading for an Anti-Mullah Revolt?

Iran is ruled by many Shahs today, each wearing Islam's robes that cloak the terror they replaced



"The most intense patriotism usually flourishes in the rear lines," wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago* about Russia at war with Nazi Germany. Not so in post-revolution Islamic Iran. Four months after "Allah's victorious forces" locked horns with the "infidel Iraqis" in a senseless war, patriotism heads the growing list of scarce commodities.

Instead, much of Iran—at least the Iran that matters to the men who rule it—is preoccupied with its own survival as an Islamic republic. On 16 January, the second anniversary of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's flight from his rebellious country, the air in Teheran was electric. As a fresh snowfall settled on the city's streets, many people remembered the jubilation that had followed the Shah's departure. There was no joy about now. Clearly audible were rumbles of a storm that might either topple the Islamic regime or radically alter the

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Iranian mullahs ready to go to battlefield: who botched the war? AP



nation's power struggle. Sadly, this seemed to stem from the Iranians' own mistakes. An Iran that had amazed the world with its resistance to the Iraqi attack now seemed poised to self-destruct.

The explanation could lie in an Asian diplomat's comment in Teheran last week. "The thing holding Iran together," he said, "is anarchy. If Iran had had a centralised, albeit weak, administration, collapse would have been almost instantaneous. Fortunately, each centre of anarchy exerts a centrifugal force that holds the whole together."

This centrifugal force is now in danger of slipping into an uncontrollable spin that may soon spell the end of the two-year-old Islamic experiment. Over the last year, as the energies of the militant clerics ruling Iran focused first on the US hostages and America "the great Satan" and then on the war with Iraq, dissent has begun to surface with regularity.

In the three weeks I spent in Iran, a cross-section of people—ranging from bell-boys, shopkeepers, engineers and government officials to army commanders—all reiterated one point with amazing similarity, a point made dra-

matically at a freezing refreshment halt on the long bus ride from Shiraz to Teheran. A young man called Mohammad, wife in tow, plucked at my sleeve and began to speak volubly. "The *mullahs* have ruined everything," he said. "The IRP (Islamic Republican Party) is full of asses who have undone Iran. Go back and write: Bani-Sadr is the only man talking sense, the only one who can save us." An armed *pasdar* (literally, guardian, the name given to members of the revolutionary guard), who seemed to follow English, stood uncomfortably close by. But Mohammad's eloquence was loud and indignant.

Anger: All universities in Iran, including the only English-medium one at Shiraz, have been shut for seven months now. The reason? A 'cultural revolution' that demands the 'Islamisation' of all higher education. The result? Groups of angry students at almost every Teheran streetcorner, animatedly discussing their forced lethargy, holding up posters demanding the universities' reopening. "How can they Islamise science?" exploded one student. "Have the *mullahs* already forgotten that the students

Huge Friday prayer meeting at Teheran University



AP



bled for the revolution, that we fought then for freedom"? Less than five per cent of Iran's population is literate, and unlike in the Shah's days, study abroad is discouraged. Students who came home from universities abroad after the revolution now feel trapped.

Forty per cent of Iran's workforce of nine million is unemployed, and inflation is currently nudging 7.5 per cent. All imports cost 50 per cent more now because of Western trade sanctions and increased commissions for middlemen in the Gulf and Western Europe. But Teheran's long and arterial Mossadeq Avenue (formerly Avenue Pahlavi) is today crammed with pavement stalls hawking an astonishing variety of smuggled goods—anything from Honda motorcycles to flashlight bulbs.

The idle student and out-of-work men who run the stalls have resisted attempts by the authorities to evict them. Another surprise: every other stall sells a bright crop of pre-recorded cassettes that are loudly advertised from natty stereo systems. This is openly defiant of the official ban on hip-jerking music that forced Iranian pop star Gougoush to flee the country.

Everywhere—in Teheran, in the 'heartland' cities of Esfahan and Shiraz, in the 'ethnic' cities of Tabriz and Mashad—one sees multiplying signs of disillusionment with the fruits of the revolution. Says a professor at the closed Teheran University: "The revolution's gains have been all negative. There is no Shah, no SAVAK, no over-dependence on the US. Is there anything on the 'yes' side?"

1981 was heralded ominously for the regime by Teheran's *bazaris* (merchants). The *bazaris* reminded the government that their strikes and their money had propelled the revolution towards victory; ridiculing Prime Minister Mohammd Ali Rajai's claim that his cabinet consisted of "experts", they cite a long list of governmental misdemeanours and demanded Rajai's resignation.

The same day, Dr Karim Sanjabi, 75, leader of the Opposition National Front and provisional Foreign Minister after the revolution, issued his own warning to the *mullahs*. Government officials, charged Sanjabi, were trying to deceive the public into assuming that "chaos and shortcomings are the natural results of a revolution". "We cannot be silent spectators to the destruction of our own country," Sanjabi continued, and castigated the regime for "defying historical truths".

Fear: Fear stalks the Iranians as much as it did in the Shah's time. Although many top figures in the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, were executed and many more imprisoned, a new and shadowy internal intelli-

◀ **A Pasdar:** Islam's watchdogs, they strike terror into people



Who represents Iran today: the girls in western dress, or the two mullahs in the background?

gence organisation called SAVAMA has surfaced. The watchdogs of the revolution are everywhere. A favourite means of disposing of one's 'enemy' is to accuse him of being linked with the US and the CIA. Targets of such unsubstantiated allegations have little alternative but to flee into exile, or disappear underground. Significantly, no official lists of CIA and SAVAK agents have ever been issued, and most Iranians know that one prominent ex-SAVAK man who is today rumoured to be a SAVAMA front-ranker is General Fardost.

Islam has provided cover for a disturbing range of authoritarian measures that often curtail everyday liberties. If the revolution brought enforced Islamisation like a ban on alcohol, nightclubs, 'decadent' entertainment and 'corrupting' imports in its wake, it has also produced a whimsical style of government that lacks even an iota of cohesion. The post-revolution euphoria that ensured 20.1 million votes saying 'yes' to an Islamic Republic in March 1979 has now given way to despair, downright anger, and a snowballing urge for moderation.

Opposition to the regime has almost inevitably rallied behind the only moderate figure President Abulhasan Bani-Sadr, 47, who paradoxically may be the biggest internal threat within the government. A soft-

spoken man who was directly elected in January 1980 by over 10 million votes, Bani-Sadr, under the Islamic constitution, is second in line to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the 'leader of the revolution'. But he has been the target of a steady and worsening attack from the powerful and militant clerics who hold Iran in an iron grip. "Iran has a puppet regime," snorts a Teheran hotelier, "and the mullahs are the reckless puppeteers."

Big brother-like, Khomeini's stern face stares at a visitor from cloth and paper posters and gaudily coloured murals in every nook and cranny. An ecstatic following marked down the capture of the US hostages in November 1979, the disastrous US rescue mission, and President Carter's electoral defeat to the 'divine' force guiding 'Imam' Khomeini. But the crippling Western trade sanctions and the delay in driving the invading Iraqis out have cast a pall of doubt on the capacity of one man to influence events with his pronouncements.

Until the enactment of the constitution in December 1979, Khomeini seemed to wield unlimited power; much of the administration in the preceding year had been carried out on the basis of *elamiehs* (directives) issued by Khomeini from his house in Qom. But the regularisation of government paved the way for a quiet

takeover of effective power by the mullahs. Their militant Islamic Republican Party (IRP) polled only 8.5 million votes in the December 1979 parliamentary elections, but they won all but two of the 270 seats in the nation's Majlis (Parliament). Observers feel Iran has switched from one kind of one-party rule to another, with the IRP replacing the Shah's Rastakhiz party.

The hard-line group of mullahs and laymen (who claim to be Khomeini's representatives in every important, body) actually enjoys absolute, arrogant domination over the government and the ministers who are supposed to run it. The result: a maddening chorus of voices, each of which claims to be the official one. The biggest pitfall facing other countries who have to deal with Iran today is that the nation lacks a discernible government.

In this confusion, Khomeini has undergone a sharp and vivid transformation from bushy-eyebrowed hawk to harassed *paterfamilias*. In recent weeks, he has repeatedly admonished his squabbling followers, bringing to mind the distraught Jayaprakash Narayan after the Janata Party began to disintegrate. A fortnight back, Khomeini asked Bani-Sadr's critics to stop sniping and to remember that "ordinary people do not understand the affairs of war"—a reference to the mounting criticism that Bani-

Sadr, who is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and his generals have not succeeded in throwing the invading Iraqis out.

Bani-Sadr has, however, wisely opted to spend much of his time on the battle front with the troops, trying to restore their morale, which was shattered after the revolution by the *mullahs*, who felt the army had been too loyal to the Shah. Consequently, Bani-Sadr has spared himself the muddying that would result were he to remain in anarchic Teheran. He has also gained the full support of the army, and many Iranians openly say that if a revolt against the *mullahs* were to take place, the army would spearhead it, and retain Bani-Sadr as head of government.

New tyranny: The two men who share Iran's triumvirate with Khomeini—Ayatollahs Kazem Shariatmadari, 82, and Golpaygani, in his late 70s, are today under house arrest in Qom. Ayatollah Taleqani, who was perhaps the most popular religious leader in Iran and had been tortured by the Shah's police, died in 1979. His daughter, Azam Taleqani, who was once raped before him, is a Majlis member today, and an outspoken critic of harsh Islamic punishment. She is also vehement about the restoration of Iranian women's rights; but her two sisters are reportedly in prison today.

When Ayatollah Shariatmadari voiced a mild complaint in late 1979 about the vast powers granted

Khomeini in the constitution (Khomeini is the *Faqih*—jurisprudent—who holds veto power over every act of government) a threatening mob surrounded his house in Qom and killed a guard. This sparked off a revolt by Shariatmadari's Turkish supporters in Tabriz, capital of Iran's east Azerbaijan province, which had to be put down by hastily air-lifted Pasdaran (revolutionary guards). "The role of the clergy is a spiritual one," said Shariatmadari before his house arrest. "I don't think we should involve ourselves in government. The clergy should fight threats of a new tyranny."

In an angry letter written to Khomeini on 31 October last year, Bani-Sadr was more explicit. "The clergy are sabotaging the spirit of the

Big brother: a Pasdar paints a huge Khomeini portrait on a Teheran wall



military commanders," he wrote. "No President has been suppressed so much. The existence of the country is endangered; people are losing their faith. The members of the present government are inefficient, they are not impartial and they openly oppose the President. This government is not accepted by the people..."



One morning in the heart of Teheran, a group of Pasdaran were busy tearing down posters from a wall. A passing Iranian translated the derisive couplet they carried: *Danishju-e-khat-e-Iman, Ham tu khari ham Imam*—"students in the line of the Imam are donkeys, just like the Imam". It was symbolic of the anger directed at the "students in the line of the Imam", who, led by a cleric called Hojatoleslam Mousavi Khomeini'ha, captured the US hostages in November 1979 and plunged the nation into bristling confrontation with the United States. Most Iranians feel the hostage capture deprived their country of precious supplies and spare parts for the sophisticated armaments purchased by the Shah.

A joke making the rounds in Teheran sums up the mood of the people: Ayatollah Khomeini is in his bedroom one day, and his followers in an adjoining room are startled to hear the Imam muttering "Shall I put it in, or shall I take it out?" When this question is repeated a few times, making it sound more and more salacious every time, the followers cannot resist the temptation. Rushing to the keyhole, they peep into Khomeini's room. What do they see? The Imam standing before a mirror, his turban in one hand and the Shah's crown in the other, wondering aloud whether to hide the crown under or place it openly atop the turban.

Storm-troopers: During the first six months after the revolution, Iran was run by hastily-assembled *Komitehs*, groups of armed men. In August 1979, most of the *Komiteh* men were co-opted into the Islamic revolutionary guards, the Pasdaran. Although a maximum force of 40,000 Pasdaran was envisaged, there are more than 70,000 today. Dressed in ubiquitous khaki, the Pasdaran perform a variety of duties, ranging from checking incoming passengers at Teheran's Mehrabad airport to "defending" Islam against "counter-revolutionaries". The *Komitehs* still act as unpredictably vicious guardians of local law and order.

Little known is the fact that the war with Iraq proved to be so bad for Iran because it was fought for almost two months, not by the army but by the Pasdaran. Trigger-happy young men who are devout Shias and believe that

death on the battlefield means instant martyrdom and ascent to *Beheshu* (heaven) the Pasdaran botched the war effort badly and, military experts believe, allowed the Iraqis to inflict the damage they did, a situation that would not have arisen had the trained army been fighting. So numerous are stories of Pasdaran accidentally shooting themselves or downing their own warplanes that Teheran radio routinely issues plaintive requests like: "Brothers and sisters, one of our planes will fly low overhead tonight. Please do not fire at it." Reported to have been trained by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Pasdaran strike terror in most Iranians' hearts.

Meanwhile, opposition parties in

does not owe allegiance to either Beijing or Moscow, is reported to be organising itself secretly for revolt. Recently, however, the Fedayeen split into two factions. Aksariat, the major faction, propagates armed struggle, while Akkaiat, the minority faction, believes in "democratic" struggle.

The pro-Moscow Tudeh (communist) Party is allowed to function and has proclaimed its support for the revolution. But its power base is not very big, although it, too, is reported to be preparing for the eventuality of a counter-revolution. Tudeh members are accused of being *Intihazziin* (opportunists). But their leader, Noorudin Kianoori, is presently in Paris, collecting funds and support.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party



A little boy is taught to fire a gun on Teheran television

Iran have been persecuted and pilloried. Most of them, especially the left parties, have been banned. Almost all operate clandestinely today. The party that appears to be accumulating support every day is the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI). The PMOI advocates "Islamic socialism". Its militia engaged the Shah's troops in some of the bloodiest street fighting during the revolution. Yet it is under harsh attack today from the IRP and the Pasdaran. In late December, the last Mojahedin centre in Teheran was forced to close by Pasdaran who killed some PMOI supporters in a violent clash. One of the two top Mojahedin leaders was recently sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on charges of spying for the Soviet Union. The other is rumoured to be in London now. Despite this, I saw many plucky youngsters, mostly girls, selling xeroxed copies of the PMOI's daily.

The Fedayeen Khalq, which toes a more radical Marxist-Leninist line and

(KDP) is proving to be the biggest thorn in the regime's flesh. A full-scale civil war that erupted in the northwestern province of Kurdistan in March 1979 has bogged down two full divisions of the Iranian army. The Kurds are reported to be receiving arms and aid from both Iraq and the Soviet Union. Fifteen KDP officials were sentenced to death on 21 December, topping a long list of rebel leaders who have been exterminated. Kurdish leader Sheikh Fazlollah Hussaini, a Sunni Muslim, has vowed to achieve independence for his people.

Ayatollah Shariatmadari's Muslim People's Republican Party (MPRP) which once commanded a large following among the Turks in the Azerbaijan region, was 'dissolved' in August 1979, and is little heard of today. The National Democratic Front (NDF) seemed set to be a partner in the government after the revolution, but its leaders, headed by Matin Daffary, are today in exile.

Vicious: The vicious twists in the government's perception of who its friends are, are summed up by the story of Admiral Ahmad Madani. A tough politician, Madani contested the presidential elections last year, and was later considered by Bani-Sadr for the Prime Ministership that Rajai eventually gained. Later, he was appointed governor of the Khuzestan province, where he ruthlessly put down ethnic Arabs.

In August last year, the regime "discovered" a plot by the Iranian air force base at Nuzeh to launch a *coup d'etat*, and many officers were jailed or shot. Madani was implicated in the plot; simultaneously, he was charged, on the basis of "documents" discovered at the US embassy, of having US links. The upshot: Madani disappeared underground, and is today

showdown. On 3 January he addressed Rajai in stark words: "You want absolute rule and you are against the people's freedom. The argument is over freedom, and I am in favour of these freedoms... you nominate ministers you know I will not approve... I am not a stamping machine." Khomeini, who is known to support Bani-Sadr (which is the only reason Bani-Sadr has managed to retain his job) has refused to intervene in the tussle.

Growing signs of popular discontent have included insults to Khomeini. During my stay in the country, reports came of defacement of Khomeini's pictures in Esfahan, Tabriz and Mashad. A sacrilegious act, the defacements provoked the *mullahs* to organise proclergy demonstrations that would have certainly

the 8th Imam, Reza. But a subsequent event in Mashad was even more significant, and people in Teheran were discussing it in whispers.

On 7 January, Iran's Chief Justice, Ayatollah R Mohammad Beheshti, addressed the army's 77th division in Mashad. While ascribing to Khomeini's leadership a then recent (and apparently effective) counter-attack by Iranian forces on the Ahvaz-Susangerd front, Beheshti failed to mention Bani-Sadr. The soldiers thereupon walked out of the hall and, joined by thousands of people, marched through the streets, raising pro-Bani-Sadr slogans.



It was very clear, therefore, that major trouble lay ahead for the nation's Islamic regime. Almost all the people who had fought beside the *mullahs* against the Shah's oppressive rule are today in the dock themselves. The *bazaris*, whose prolonged market closures paralysed life at the height of the revolution, the leftist parties, many of whose members were tortured and killed by SAVAK or died in street fighting, and the moderate politicians have all turned irrevocably against the regime.

But most Iranians agree that there was little alternative left for them in escaping the clutches of the frenetic and socially disruptive westernisation and modernisation that the Shah tried to ram through, than to flock to Islam's banner. But for the essentially soft-centred Shia Iranian, who "lies between a Sunni lawyer and a Sufi mystic", according to a Shiraz scholar, what has become nightmarish is the fact that Islam, which ought to be used as a shield, has been turned into a spear.

What shape will the revolt take, if it does occur? Most Iranians feel that there will be a spontaneous mass uprising against the *mullahs*, that there will be a lot of fighting between the Paskaran and the army, and that the partisan support will come from the leftists. One date being bandied about in Teheran for the counter-revolution was *nav-ruz*, the Iranian new year's day, which falls on 21 March this year.

The future: Whether or not Iran is verging on revolt today, one question never fails to disturb people deeply: what will happen if Ayatollah Khomeini were to die?

Since March 1980, Khomeini has been staying in Jamaran, a north Teheran suburb (and not at Qom as is commonly assumed). He has suffered two heart attacks. Normally soft-spoken, he appeared, during my stay, very weak on television when delivering his speeches. Sources say that he wants to go to Europe for treatment,

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Bani-Sadr with his troops: far from the madding crowd

shuttling in exile between London and the US.

Within the government itself, the bitter struggle between Bani-Sadr and Prime Minister Rajai promises violence between their supporters at some stage. Although Bani-Sadr holds veto power over cabinet appointments, most ministers, from Rajai down, have been nominated by the Majlis and rammed down the President's throat. Bani-Sadr, however, has refused to approve Rajai's nominees to three key ministries—foreign affairs, commerce and economic affairs and finance. Rajai often complains sullenly in the Majlis that the President is being 'uncooperative'.

In a 'diary' he writes for the paper *Engelab-e-Islami* (which he reportedly owns and edits) Bani-Sadr frequently lashes out at his colleagues and sounds clear warnings about an imminent

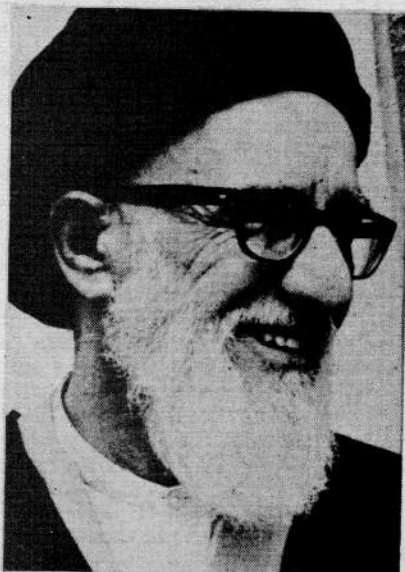
turned violent. But Khomeini stepped in to ask the people to desist, saying that they should not mind even if he were personally attacked, reminding them that a war was being fought.

Ominous: After a strong speech in the northeastern city of Mashad by Salamati, a Bani-Sadr protege and Majlis member, an angry crowd took to the streets, shouting anti-clergy slogans. The demonstrators were told by Ayatollah Lahooti, Friday prayers leader in Rasht, that "after (the) Imam, if there is anyone who could lead the revolution to victory, it is Bani-Sadr."

The Mashad protests were considered ominous, for Mashad is the holiest city in Iran (holier than Qom, Khomeini's headquarters, where many theological seminaries are situated) because it contains the tomb of

but is afraid that chaos will reign if he does. There is very little doubt that Khomeini's death would spark off bloody strife, for he has been the linchpin holding disparate loyalties together.

Even if Khomeini's health were to rally, the pressures that have been building up over the last year—particularly in the neglected ethnic regions—and have been held in check only by the war, would explode into the open. The Kurds' insurrection would then conceivably be joined by the rebellion of the Arabs in Khuzestan, and the Baluchis in Sistan-Baluchistan. There is also the distinct possibility of armed struggle between the supporters of Bani-Sadr and the clergy. "The real war will begin when this war ends," says a Teheran shopkeeper.



Taleqani: the popular Ayatollah who is missed today

The regime's relations with other countries are never predictable. In June last year, the Iranian Foreign Ministry had to forbid inspection of diplomatic bags and diplomats' baggage after many foreign envoys were subjected to humiliating searches.

But foreign policy fluctuates wildly, and is usually impenetrably murky. The hostage issue seemed to have been resolved because of a genuine fear about possible military action by incoming US President Reagan. Henry Kissinger's trip to the mid-East in December also set alarm bells ringing in Teheran. Although US military action, or a blockade of the Persian Gulf, would have propelled Iran into a Soviet embrace, it was clear that Iran could not afford to antagonise the West indefinitely.

The virulent anti-Americanism of the *mullahs* has inevitably led the nation closer to the Soviet Union. Supplies of essential commodities, including sugar and rice, have been

trickling in from the Soviet Union through Iran's Caspian Sea ports. The Soviets are also reported to be pleased with the 'recognition' of the Tudeh party, and the growing affinity between Islamic and socialistic rhetoric. Moscow apparently believes that the "constructive fanaticism" witnessed in Iran today is akin to Marx's dictum that "he who destroys is also a builder".

A trade protocol signed by the two countries in June last year provided for expansion of Soviet-aided projects, including a giant steel mill at Ahvaz, an irrigation scheme on the Arān river that forms the border between the two countries, expansion of Bandar Anzali port on the Caspian Sea, and increased access for Iranian ships in Soviet ports.

Things haven't been altogether



Khomeini: leader of the 'students in the line of the Imam'

bright for the Soviet Union, however. Last June, the first secretary in the Soviet embassy in Teheran was given 24 hours to leave the country on charges of spying. On 27 December, the first anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a huge mob attacked the embassy, smashing chandeliers in the reception chamber and provoking a shaken Moscow into issuing a stern reprimand. Iran's gas exports to the Soviets were halted in early 1980 following a price dispute, and Moscow in turn rejected a request for increased use of the Volga-Don river transit facilities.

Iran has also been buying arms from east European countries, and the Majlis speaker recently sent an amount of two billion rials to the Soviet Union for the purchase of light and medium arms for the Pasdaran. Not realising the significance of what they are saying, IRP spokesmen have cited the prophet's purchase of arms from *kafirs* (non-believers) and

likened the arms purchases to those made by Egypt (under Nasser), North Korea and Cuba.

Terrible price: If one were to trace the roots of today's chaos in Iran, they would lead back to the Shah, who spent billions of dollars on stocking an arsenal he believed would make him unchallenged policeman of the Gulf; neither did the Shah's attempts to transform his people's social fabric succeed. The vicissitudes that have beset the Iranians during the last two years are like few others in any nation's recent history. More than physical, the emotional toll has been enormous.

Legend has it that Karim Khan-Zand was the last Persian ruler to die peacefully in bed, his kingdom intact, in Shiraz in 1792. The capital was



Rajai: at daggers drawn with the President

thereafter shifted to Teheran, and, the legend continues, no Iranian ruler ever since has died in peace; assassination, exile or revolution have plagued every attempt to administer this diverse nation.

Perhaps the sour legacy Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left behind can best be summed up by the coins circulating in Iran today. The Shah claimed descent from the Achaemenids, and so his coins bore the year 2536 (in 1978). In reality, too, he was trying to leap six centuries ahead with his nation's oil wealth. The Islamic republic's newly minted coins this year, on the other hand bear the year 1359 according to the Islamic calendar. Not only has the Shah's great leap forward been stilled, therefore, but Iran has now been forced to withdraw six centuries into the past. Can it be done, ask anguished Iranians, without extracting a terrible price, only a tiny part of which may have been paid so far?

—Chaitanya Kalbag in Teheran