

Iran: Towards Islamic Medievalism?

With a step forward from Monarchy to a Republic, Iran has taken two steps backwards: restricting freedom, curbing women's rights and executions after summary trials.

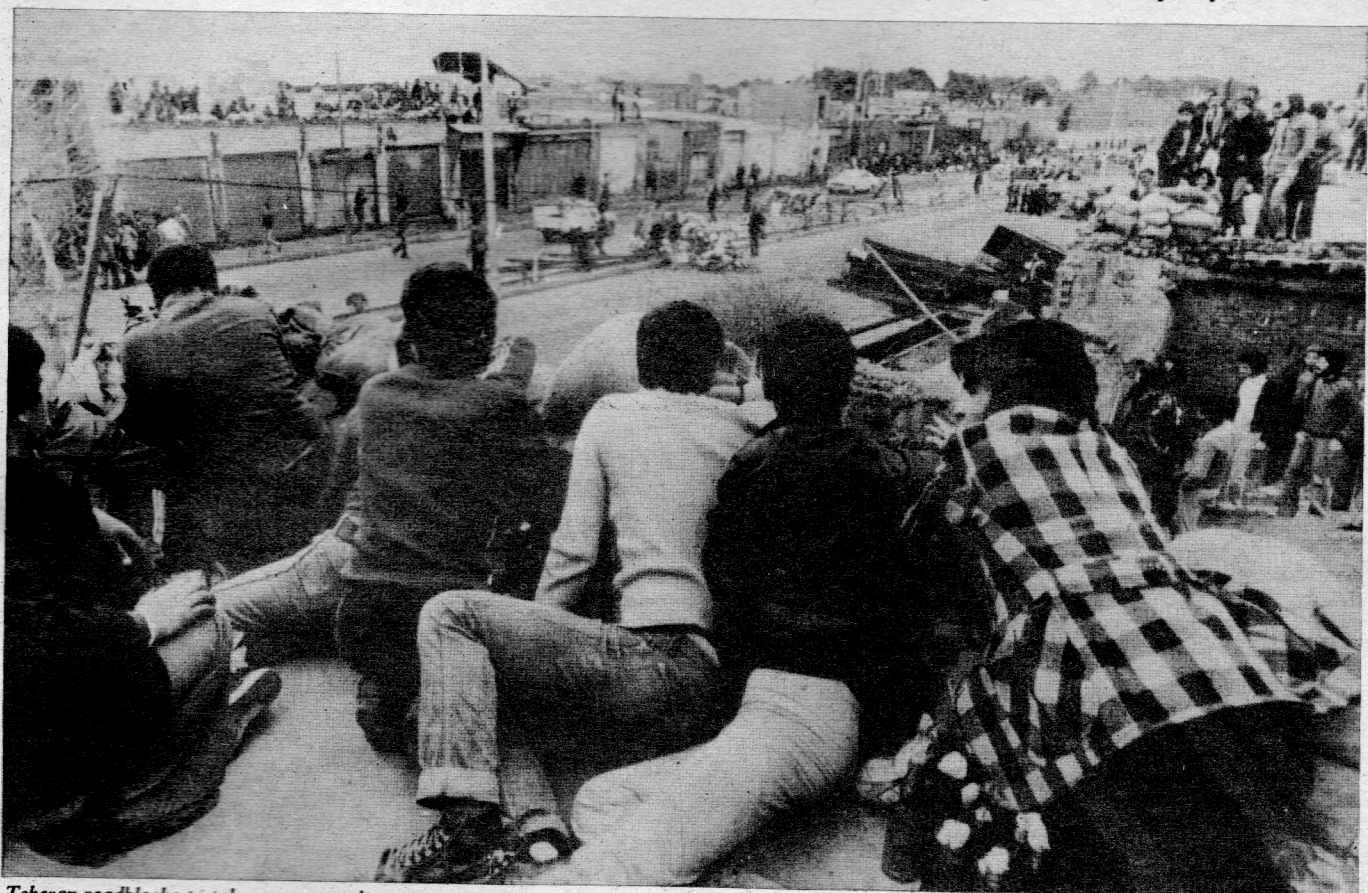
By Chaitanya Kalbag

WHO would believe that I should work 10 hours a day for 37 years to help my country only to see it go back to the point where I began?" said the Shah of Iran in Marrakesh recently. Who, indeed, could have foreseen that the country that the Shah ruled with a mailed fist would so suddenly slip out of his grasp? How did his awesome SAVAK intelligence network and his Western support collapse? And how did his assiduously cultivated image of a father-king taking his country towards the 21st century disintegrate? The world can be cruelly fickle in its loyalties. Today the Shah is alone and bitter, with only the fistful of Iranian soil that he took with him to remind him of his once splendid kingdom.

In *The Crash of '79*, Paul Erdman ended his chilling narrative with the Shah and his military commanders being vapourised in an atomic explosion. That did not happen: the Shah is alive, and trying his best to put on a cheerful front. The faith he reposed in his army has been cruelly betrayed: many of his military commanders have been summarily executed, and the rest have been compulsorily retired in the new regime's sweeping purge of the armed forces. The Shah's appointee, Shapour Bakhtiar, was also abandoned by the army. Everything the Shah stood for, military might, oil wealth, modernisation, and 'emancipation', was swept by the tidal wave of revolt. Riding stern-eyed and iron-willed on the crest of this wave was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,

78 years old, ascetic in the extreme, and fiercely determined to make Iran an Islamic republic and to usher in rigid enforcement of the Shariat law. From the moment the Ayatollah returned to Teheran after a fifteen-year exile, it was evident that the fragile government headed by Bakhtiar would not last very long. Although the Shah's crack palace guards, the Immortals, and a few army regiments did retaliate brutally against rioting supporters of the Ayatollah, and airforce cadets, in the last days before Bakhtiar's resignation, mutinied at the Doshan Tappeh airbase, it took more than 200 deaths in the final conflagration before the supreme army command declared its neutrality in what would obviously escalate into civil war. After that Khomeini's forces rapidly took over the country.

Of Iran's 35 million people, over 90 per cent are Shi'ite Muslims. The Kurds, about a million in number, belong to the Sunni sect; there are also large numbers of Armenians and Jews. There has been considerable resentment against the Baha'is and the Jews because some of the major governmental posts, and SAVAK positions, were occupied by members of these religions. The majority of Iranians



Teheran roadblocks to take on army units

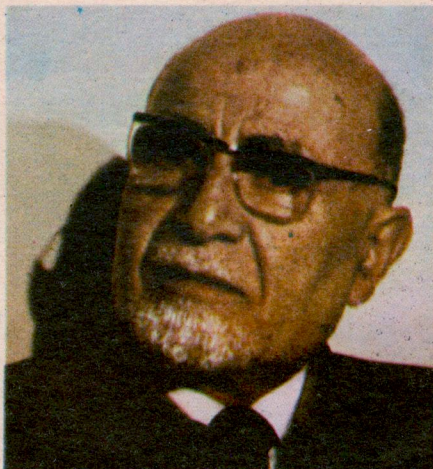


Ayatollah Khomeini addressing a press conference in Teheran

have welcomed the Ayatollah's advent and the Shah's departure. How happily they will take to the process of Islamisation, the precise characteristics of which are shrouded in the shrill outbursts by the Ayatollah, remains to be seen. His provisional prime minister, an oil engineer named Mehdi Bazargan, is known to be tough-minded, practical, and an extremely devout Shia. A referendum on whether or not Iran will be an Islamic republic, and then an election to choose a formal government, have both been promised. At the same time, the Ayatollah has expelled Israelis, and announced a ban on oil exports to Israel.

This move will certainly win Iran sympathy from its Arab neighbours, for during the Shah's rule, there was barely-concealed anger on the part of the Arabs at the Shah's refusal to boycott Israel and to cut off oil supplies to the Israelis. Moreover, the Shah's desire to be the superpower of the Persian Gulf, and his takeover of some of the disputed Gulf islands had created widespread apprehension in Arab minds.

If an Islamic republic is created, Iran will cease to be a favourite client-state of the United States blocking billions of dollars' worth of arms deals that were in the pipeline when the Shah was de-



Prime Minister Bazargan

posed. Iran's new rulers have also promised a halt to 'military expansionism', and have held out the disturbing prospect of a cutback in oil production, manufacturing only just enough to meet internal demand but possibly triggering a further increase in the price of petroleum.

How the recent changes will affect Iran's relations with India, too, remains to be seen. Indo-Iranian relations have usually been cordial. But the formation of an Islamic state might conceivably lead to a closer alliance between Iran and Pakistan. In today's poli-

tical equations, which are very often underlined by the necessity to cultivate potential oil suppliers, this could have far-reaching consequences. Over 90 per cent of Iran's export income came from oil; but Khomeini is emphatic that his country will not henceforth 'squander away' her oil wealth.

The degree of genuine popularity that the revolution has exhibited has stunned observers. Khomeini was, in practical terms, only the symbol of the revolt: his name and his face became the rallying-points for the already-aroused population. Iran's revolution's effect on future world events may be far more profound than seems apparent now.

What exercises Iran-watchers' minds most is whether Khomeini will take his country back into medievalism. American critics insist that he will. Knowledgeable sources, however, say that Khomeini is not intractable, and that he will incline towards a secular state based on Iranian tradition rather than the Wahabi inspired puritanism of Saudi Arabia, Libya and Pakistan. The Ayatollah plans to retire to the holy city of Qom after overseeing the installation of an elected government—which, if his present popularity is any indication, will come in on a landslide. ■