

ARTICLES.

■ MOSQUE AND PEOPLE POWER

Iran's Home-grown Revolution

RICHARD FALK

Recent developments in Iran, whatever their outcome, have a momentous significance for this century. Not only is the political, economic and cultural destiny of an important country at stake, not only is a fundamental challenge to American foreign policy involved, but a completely new revolutionary process is unfolding in Iran that is independent of the legacy of all previous revolutions. Its success or defeat will inevitably exert an awesome impact on the overall prospects of some 700 million Moslems elsewhere, and, quite possibly, on non-Moslem peoples throughout the third world.

How else, but in these terms, can we interpret Zbigniew Brzezinski's recent insistence that the C.I.A. mount a major study of political life in the entire area of Moslem dominance? Islam has emerged in Iran as a major new anti-imperialist threat to American interests in the third world, certainly eclipsing Communism or radicalism in the oil-rich Middle East.

Even William Sullivan, our counterinsurgency-specialist Ambassador in Teheran, reluctantly conceded that the upheaval in Iran "is a genuine revolution. I can't describe it any other way." Iran's beleaguered Prime Minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, said to us the night the Shah left the country, "The people want revolution." He was, at the time, expressing his frustration with the situation, contending that the Khomeini program was vague and dangerous, an instrument of Communism, and much less beneficial for the country than his own program to establish an orderly, liberal democracy in Iran.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has emerged as the unquestioned leader of the "Glorious Movement," in part, because his posture has been revolutionary in its claim and character. For decades he has rejected the legitimacy of the Pahlavi dynasty in utterly uncompromising terms, whereas other opponents of the Shah, even respected leaders of the National Front, such as Karim Sanjabi, and comparably eminent aya-

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tollahs such as Kezim Shariatmadery of Qum, were willing to work obediently for reforms and influence within the framework of the monarchy. And now, it is Khomeini's rigid insistence that Bakhtiar has absolutely no mandate to govern that gives the political crisis in Iran its revolutionary intensity. Such a stand entails danger and terrifying uncertainty at a time when the population is confronted by a heavily equipped military led by pro-Shah generals, who are backed, possibly even incited, by the United States in their schemes to stage a counterrevolutionary coup—even if such a coup produces, as it probably will, a bloody, protracted civil war.

It is difficult, of course, to predict at this stage how the situation will unfold. The American role is critical. Although Sullivan said in mid-January that a "military coup wouldn't accomplish much," subsequent indications are that American policy is encouraging the generals to look favorably upon a military solution. How else can one interpret Carter's decision to ship 200,000 barrels of fuel for internal military use, as well as the reports of daily contacts among the Iranian generals, the American Gen. Robert Huyser and the White House? And how else to interpret press reports that high officials in Washington were pleased when the Army displayed its resolve by opening fire on unarmed civilian demonstrators, inflicting heavy casualties, several times late in January? The Pentagon, in official releases, has declared that even a neutralist regime in Teheran would affect adversely American interests. Our conversations with a wide spectrum of opposition leaders revealed that these American moves are seen as a continuing intervention in the internal affairs of Iran and are deeply resented because they are believed to be driving the country back toward tyranny or to civil war.

Because the revolutionary surge is so strong, no political resistance is conceivable at this time. Despite some scoffing by the mainstream press, we came to agree with the estimates given us in Teheran that 99 percent of the population had come to oppose the Shah, while a somewhat smaller, but still overwhelming majority—somewhere between 70 and 90 percent—support Khomeini. Now, only a brutal military counterrevolution can break the revolutionary will of the people, given their organization and unity.

So far, the Khomeini forces have displayed remarkable restraint. Despite persistent incitement by the Army and *provocateur* tactics by the Savak in a large number of cities, including unprovoked attacks on peaceful crowds, atrocities against hospitals and medical workers and cruel violence that includes using high-technology weaponry against children, the opposition has not resorted to arms or violence. The main incidents of destruction of property and terrorism in recent months are generally believed, even by middle-class Iranians suspicious of Khomeini, to be the work of Savak. The discipline imposed by the religious leadership has so far restrained a rising wave of anger among the people. Khomeini personally intervened in several inflamed settings to counsel

calmness, perseverance in demonstrations and strikes, and absolute nonrecourse to arms. But the option to adopt the tactics of armed struggle is held in reserve, as a last resort. The level of popular frustration was manifest in the most recent marches when demonstrators chanted, "Leaders! Leaders! Give us arms!" The mildest of all the religious leaders we met, the widely revered Ayatollah Shariatmadery, vowed that the movement would wage a jihad, or holy war, rather than renounce its goals at this stage. He added—what seems now beyond doubt—that "Our influence among the Iranian people is without limit." All the evidence suggests that most of those millions of Iranians who have these past months stood their ground bravely against machine guns, tanks and helicopter gunships would welcome the chance to shoot back rather than abandon their cause or continue to suffer further casualties passively.

What we have in Iran, thus far, is a remarkable revolutionary process with three distinctive features. First of all, it has been a great triumph for the tactic of militant nonviolence (mass demonstrations, a general strike) against the organized power of a modern, tyrannical and ruthless state. Without a single shot being fired against his legions, the Shah has been toppled from the pinnacle of power. Estimates vary about the number of civilians killed since January 1978, but most figures are in the neighborhood of 20,000. Virtually all of these casualties have been sustained by an unarmed populace, and although the figure is high, it is but a fraction of the loss of life that would undoubtedly have resulted had an armed struggle been waged over the past thirteen months.

To unleash the military, then, would deliver to op-

pressed people everywhere the tragic message that no matter how clearly they have declared their popular will, nothing short of military victory suffices in attaining control over the state. Already the movement has shut down the economy through an extraordinary general strike. This was sustained for weeks with minimal central guidance and through the most massive manifestations of popular support in modern history, the great marches by millions of ordinary Iranians. The United States Government should ponder the moral consequences of defying this popular will by encouraging the generals to provoke a civil war. In addition to bloodshed and devastation, such a course will reinforce the ugly claim that power derives only from the barrel of a gun. In the Iranian setting it will suddenly lend authority to, and possibly confer leadership upon, the hitherto isolated terrorist groups, who have all along been calling armed struggle indispensable.

A second feature of the Iranian revolutionary movement is its indigenous quality. For the first time in the modern world a national revolution owes nothing to Western sources. Its inspiration is quite independent of the legacy of the American, French or Russian revolutions, and neither Marxism nor liberalism seemed to have influenced its leaders to any degree. We were often told by friends in Iran that this was "Islam's finest hour." The Shi'ia tradition within Islam identifies the religious life directly with the struggle against oppression and for social justice. The earliest Shi'ia heroes were martyrs willing to suffer and sacrifice their lives for the achievement of a just social order. In contrast to the dominant Sunni forms of Islam, prevalent in all Moslem societies other than Iran, Shi'ia raises its own funds and considers the poor as its chief constituency.

The third feature of the revolution in Iran is, of course, its religious character. For religion to assume a revolutionary posture is to challenge Western preconceptions that a religious outlook is irrelevant, or even hostile, to social change. The religious core of the Khomeini movement is a call for social justice, fairness in the distribution of wealth, a productive economy organized around national needs and a simplicity of life style and absence of corruption that minimizes differences between rich and poor, rulers and ruled.

As Seyyed Javadi, an influential intellectual figure in the movement, with a progressive political outlook and close political connections to Khomeini, recently emphasized: "Our national revolution has a long way to go yet before achieving final victory." He added, significantly, that "Religious and political principles are not our goals, but they are a means of breaking away from despotic rule, corruption, oppression and dependence on foreign influence." Whether these goals will be achieved soon remains obscure. At this stage the main obstacle seems to be American interference. This interference is likely to prolong the agony of the Iranian people. As Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, perhaps the leading religious figure phys-



DRAWINGS BY ROBERT GROSSMAN

ically present in Iran itself, put it to us: "The United States must choose between the 'bad' and the 'worse.'" At this point, rather than riding the waves of revolution, the United States is clutching at the sand of counterrevolution. In other words, the Carter Administration seems determined to choose "the worst." □

■ THE CASE FOR CULTS

Skeptics and True Believers

THEODORE ROSZAK

There are two reactions to the People's Temple tragedy that would be deeply mistaken. One would be to dismiss the event with a bewildered shrug as an unaccountable aberration. It is an aberration—in the sense that disease is an aberration of the healthy body. But when disease is chronic or threatens to become epidemic, it cries out for diagnosis and cure. It must have our attention. So too the lethal fanaticism of People's Temple, which once again confronts us with a disease of the mind that has repeated itself too often in the mass movements and sectarian violence of the modern world.

The other, more likely mistake would be to write off all "cults" indiscriminately as social evils, and to call for their investigation and harassment, or at least for their unrelenting denigration in the public eye. This would be to forget how much that is invaluable in our cultural heritage has been incubated in the committed fellowship of cults, sects and esoteric fraternities often gathered around an inspired leader. Need we recall that once Christianity was a community of twelve comrades drawn together in witness to a messianic founder, and Buddhism a mere handful of monks serving an illuminated master? The cults of the modern world include the Mennonites, the Brethren, the Amish, the Bruderhof—all gentle and retiring pacifists. The Quakers, who have for so long been numbered among the most precocious democratic and humanitarian forces in Western society, began their history as an outlandish sect of enthusiasts guided by an obstreperous prophet whose loyalty to "the inner light" transcended all law and convention.

We really have no choice as to whether we will or won't have cults and charismatic leaders among us. They are among the irrepressible constants of human society. No amount of official persecution or popular disapproval seems able to wipe them out, if necessary,

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they persevere underground as forces of unrest and rebellion. They may even survive, as they frequently have in our secular era, by casting off their obvious religious characteristics. The style of these cadres may be militantly agnostic, but their concern for ideological purity, their zeal for revolutionary justice, their devotion to prophetic leaders—Saint-Just, Mazzini, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fidel—all this is surely the residue of religious passion.

The media, always in search of convenient stereotypes, would have us see the New Age cults as a uniform breed of mindless, dope-damaged zombies programmed for unquestioning subservience to Svengali-like masters. In a recent major series in *The New York Times*, for example, behavior control by brainwashing is cited as one of the central features of contemporary cults. To a degree, the dropped-out, pathologically dependent adolescents who became the Manson family may have fitted that image. People's Temple did not. The temple was as much a left-wing political crusade as a church. In the course of the 1970s, its social program grew steadily more disaffiliated from what Jim Jones came to regard as a "Fascist America" and drifted rapidly toward outspoken Communist sympathies. We are not familiar with such a bizarre mixture of faith-healing evangelism and Marxist ideology. It should warn us—as do the examples of the Manson family and the Symbionese Liberation Army—that fanatical violence can be as much the result of paranoid politics as of paranoid religion.

If we avoid these two mistaken responses, what are we left to do? The "we" I speak of here is primarily those who live the life of the mind, for whatever their influence may be: the academics, intellectuals, clergy, publicists—those who worry their way into print over such issues. We can ask what it is that drives people to such terrifying extremes of self-enslavement, and what responsibility we may bear for keeping them from that dire choice.

Why do people surrender their freedom to totalitarian masters? The answer is not that they are morally weak. People who sacrifice all they have and are, even for a corrupted cause, cannot be evaluated that cheaply—not if we would reach out to them in charitable support. Rather, they are morally desperate. Even at their ugliest, they act from an overwhelming desire to possess and serve a transcendent ideal. No matter how brutally the Hitlers, Stalins and the Reverend Joneses of the world may finally betray that craving for absolute commitment, they first of all awaken and liberate it. They dignify its existence by letting it be publicly professed and lived. For that, they win the undying devotion of their followers. Then, of course, they go on to feed that moral hunger on hatred and to harness it to their own ruthless uses. If they are Svengalis, the device they use to rivet their victims' attention is our finest human quality: the aspiration for self-transcending purpose.

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