

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1979: Rousseau - Jefferson - Khomeini???

While the Iranian Revolution does not look exactly like the French Revolution, there are similarities. Think about causes, desire to rid the country of anyone that is against the Revolution (the Reign of Terror stage) and degrees of freedom that are given to different groups.

The Iranian revolution directed by Ayatollah Khomeini presented a fundamental challenge to the existing world order:

- ⇒ emphasizing religious purification and the rejoining of religion and politics central to early Islam
- ⇒ called for a return to a golden past age
- ⇒ directed against Western-backed governments
- ⇒ claimed divine inspiration and sought to establish a state based on Islamic precepts
- ⇒ wanted to spread their movement to wider regions.

Khomeini succeeded because of circumstances unique to Iran:

- ⇒ a nation not formally colonized but divided into British and Russian spheres of interest -- Iran thus lacked colonial bureaucratic and communications infrastructures as well as a large Western-educated middle class
- ⇒ Modernization policies, supported by Iran's oil wealth, were imposed by the regime of the Pahlavi shahs. Advances resulted, but the majority of Iranians were alienated:
 - the shah's authoritarian rule offended the middle class
 - his ignoring of Islamic conventions roused religious leaders influential with the mass of the people
 - favoritism to foreign investors and a few Iranian entrepreneurs angered bazaar merchants
 - landholders were affronted by incomplete land reform schemes that did not much benefit the rural poor
 - urban workers at first secured benefits, but then suffered from an economic slump.
 - the military were neglected.
- ⇒ When revolution came in 1978 the shah was without support and left Iran.

Khomeini then carried through radical reform:

- ⇒ Religious figures took over leadership and suppressed all opposition
- ⇒ Strict implementation of Islamic law began and women's opportunities were restricted.
- ⇒ Most of the planned reforms halted when Iraq forced a war that lasted for 10 years and absorbed most national resources. Iran finally accepted a humiliating peace in 1988.
- ⇒ The war, plus the consequences of internal repression and failed development efforts, left Iran in shambles.

Looking Backward OR A New Approach?

- ⇒ The Iranian Revolution was about political authority and in particular, what makes political authority legitimate.
- ⇒ The Qur'an is meant to be a "guide to life"; that is, it should serve as a basis for writing laws and for judging disputes. It was recognized early on in Islam that certain people, by virtue of their study and scholarship were more capable of applying these to the messy, everyday issues of society, law, and disputes. This group became the *ulama*, or "learned clerics," whose job it is to produce Islamic law (Shari'a) from their knowledge of the Islamic religion and traditions.
- ⇒ So it is scarcely surprising that as Muhammad Reza Shah of Iran began to adopt more and more Western models of society and government, and began to actively oppose the Shi'ite courts by setting up his own, that the Shi'ite clergy would turn on the regime and eventually declare it to be illegitimate. In 1975, Khomeini declared the Shah's government to be illegitimate and opposed to Islam.

If the Shah's government was illegitimate and the Constitution of Iran, built on Western principles at the beginning of the century, was opposed to Islam, what would a legitimate Islamic government look like?

- ⇒ Ideally, an Islamic republic, which is what Khomeini called this new type of state, would have laws written by a Parliament elected in multi-party elections around the country. This Parliament would be made up of people from all walks of life, would be managed by a Prime Minister representing the majority party, and would be responsible for passing laws and budgets. There is an executive branch represented by a President. But exercising power over the Parliament and the President would be a Guardian Council, made up of the most learned and intelligent clerics. In post-Revolutionary Iran, the Guardian Council was headed by Khomeini himself until his death.
- ⇒ Properly speaking, this approach is one of the most revolutionary ideas of the twentieth-century; so labeling the concept "Islamic fundamentalism" is somewhat misleading, for it covers up the lack of precedence for most of the political innovations of the Iranian Revolution.

Islamic Republicanism has several practical difficulties.

- ⇒ One issue involves efficiency. At a certain level, government is about solving problems: inequity, disputes, famine, and so forth. But if the overriding necessity is that the solutions also be properly "Islamic," a great deal of energy is spent arguing which solution is more properly Islamic.
- ⇒ So the practical problem Islamic republicanism faces, then, has two opposite poles: subjecting practical problems to so much religious dispute that solving the practical problem becomes secondary and, on the other hand, the danger of the higher clergy becoming too secularized and less grounded in the knowledge and virtue that merits their status as clergy in the first place.

However this practical problem works itself out, the idea has caught fire throughout the Islamic world and has caused revolutionary fires to break out all around the Middle East and North Africa. We may be at a crossroads in Islamic history in which Islamic government undergoes a change as profound and world-shaking as the political changes which occurred in the European Enlightenment, and Khomeini would achieve the same status as a Rousseau or a Jefferson. Or velayat i-faqih may fold under the weight its many contradictions and dilemmas.

- ⇒ ***GREAT FEAR OF THE WEST: Middle East (= OIL) choosing Khomeini over Rousseau and Jefferson***