

The Iranian Experience

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The Iranian Revolution is one of the major socio-political upheavals in recent history. The transformation of the state from a secular and nationalist monarchy to a theocracy has led, over the years, to far-reaching effects not only on the balance of power in the region but also on the struggle for Islamic revival in the Muslim world. The latter is exemplified by the fact that the term "Islamic Revolution" itself came into vogue as a result of the enthusiasm and excitement generated by the change in Iran. With reference to our ongoing discussion of the methodology for the establishment of the Islamic Public Order, we are going to deal in the present article with the following three issues:

- Can the Iranian Revolution be called a true revolution?
- Is it correct to describe the Iranian Revolution as a genuinely Islamic one? and
- Can this Revolution be adopted as a model in other Muslim countries, especially in Pakistan?

The significance of these questions is twofold. First, during the years following the revolution, our Iranian brethren as well as the Western media emphatically presented the upheaval

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in Iran as an *Islamic* Revolution. The widespread use and subsequent acceptance of this label implied that if there was anything worthy or desirable in the Iranian Revolution then it would be Islam that would receive the credit; similarly, if there was anything wrong or corrupt in it then this would inevitably tarnish Islam's image. Therefore, an analysis of the Iranian Revolution — for the purpose of deciding as to whether or not this was truly Islamic — has tremendous importance.

Secondly, a number of Muslim intellectuals floated the idea in the early 1980's that the change in Iran represents the most perfect model of an Islamic Revolution. They propounded that all Islamic activist groups should embrace the Iranian example as an ideal vis-à-vis their struggle to establish Islam as a socio-political order in their respective countries. These intellectuals went even to the extent of suggesting that Ayatollah Khomeini should be accepted as the leader and guide of the entire Muslim *Ummah*. We believe that this was an overly enthusiastic and impulsive approach. Since the revolutionary fervor generated by various Islamic revivalist parties could not find its proper outlet due to their lack of success, and since the Iranian Revolution was the only successful political change in modern times where religion had triumphed over secularism, these Islamic thinkers erroneously concluded that success for Islamic groups is possible only through emulating the Iranian example. In their zeal, however, they failed to take into account the numerous and substantial differences between the conditions existing in the pre-Revolution Iran and those prevailing in the rest of the Muslim world. As a consequence of these differences, all attempts to export the Iranian Revolution — i.e., re-enacting as such the Iranian experience in other Muslim countries — failed to meet with any success. It is for this reason as well that we need to study the Iranian Revolution in detail.

The first point that needs to be understood is this: As far as the methodology is concerned, the one revolution that must be taken as the ultimate source of guidance by all Muslims is the

archetypal *Islamic Revolution* brought about by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his devoted Companions (RAA) in the 7th century Arabia. No other revolution, irrespective of how marvelous or remarkable, can ever take the place of this Prophetic model as a source of guidance. Having said that, however, we must acknowledge the extraordinary sacrifices offered by the Iranian people in their struggle against the repressive regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi. We should also cherish the outstanding example set by the Iranians as a source of inspiration for all those who wish to bring about fundamental and positive changes in their respective societies. Moreover, despite the fact that the Iranian Revolution took place under conditions that were quite unique and it cannot, therefore, be used as a model in each and every Muslim society, the fact must be recognized that there was, indeed, one aspect of this Revolution that deserves to be carefully incorporated in the methodology of contemporary movements for *Iqamah Al-Deen*. We shall return to this issue later in this article.

We know that a "revolution" is defined as a basic and substantial change in at least one of the three principal spheres of collective human existence, i.e., the social, the political, and the economic systems. In contrast, a mere change in the religious beliefs and practices of a nation is never called a revolution, no matter how radical that change may be. In addition to the supreme Revolution brought about by Prophet Muhammad (SAW), there are only two other revolutions that qualify for this title — the French Revolution of 1789 through which a drastic change was brought about in the French political order, and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 through which the economic order in Russia underwent a profound transformation. The conversion of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century C.E. from paganism to Christianity, however, was never designated as a revolution, simply because the overall order based on kingship had remained unchanged despite the shift in the religious orientation of a very large number of people. Moreover, keeping in mind the sense in which we have used this word, neither the Industrial Revolution of Europe during the 18th century nor

the Cultural Revolution of China between the years 1966 and 1976 can be described as a true revolution, despite the fact that both of them involved profound changes. In this context, we maintain that the most sweeping and perfect revolution in the entire human history was the one brought about by Prophet Muhammad (SAW), in which not only the metaphysical creed, morals, modes of worship, and social ceremonies were thoroughly changed, but the social, political, and economic systems also underwent essential transformations within a single life-span and under the guidance of a single leader. This was a revolution *par excellence*. Indeed, the French and the Bolshevik Revolutions disappear in a haze of insignificance when compared with Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) supremely brilliant and all-embracing achievement.

In contrast to a revolution, another important phenomenon is that of *coup d'état*. This can be defined as a non-constitutional change of governmental leadership by an organized institution — most commonly by the armed forces — carried out in a swift and effective operation. It can be seen that a *coup d'état* is primarily a matter of opportunity, or taking advantage of the situation in an expeditious move, while the propagation of an ideology and a struggle carried out by a revolutionary party are essential prerequisites of a true revolution, and the two are lacking in case of a *coup d'état*, as described below.

The first prerequisite of a true revolution is the rise of a new ideology that, by virtue of the possibilities contained in it, threatens the existence of the established order. In other words, an ideology cannot be called revolutionary, in the true sense of the word, unless it directly challenges the foundations of the existing politico-socio-economic system. This ideology should either be completely novel and original, in which case it will devise its own terminology, or — in case of an old ideology — it must be re-interpreted and re-constructed at the contemporary level of consciousness and knowledge, and its socio-political implications are spelled out clearly and emphatically. This

re-interpretation of a set of old and familiar ideas in modern idiom, highlighting its dynamic and programmatic dimension, is indispensable, as without it the revolutionary ideology cannot penetrate the minds of the intellectual elite. By "intellectual elite" we mean the rational segments of the society that must first be converted before any genuine change can be brought about at the popular level.

The second prerequisite of a true revolution is the formation of a new party in which cadres are determined only on the basis of commitment, sacrifices, and sincerity of the members with respect to the ideology and objective of the party. If the status of a member inside the party reflects, in any way, the standards and norms prevailing in the society, then this shortcoming is enough to disqualify the party from being a truly revolutionary one.

Applying these criteria to the Iranian Revolution, we find that both the above mentioned prerequisites of a true revolution were absent in this particular case, as we shall see in the following paragraphs. Therefore, there is no justification in calling it a genuine revolution. Instead, we contend that the change in Iran was more akin to a *coup d'état* by the Iranian clergy.

Concerning the first prerequisite, we fail to see in the pre-Revolution Iran any extraordinary progress being made towards the re-interpretation of the wisdom of *Iman* and Islam in the contemporary idiom and at the highest intellectual level. No doubt, the ideological writings and speeches by such scholars as Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, Ali Shari'ati, Morteza Motahari, Mehdi Bazargan, Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, Sayyid Hossein Tabataba'i, and especially those by Ayatollah Khomeini himself, had not only contributed towards increasing the level of discontent against Shah's regime and in kindling revolutionary passion, they had also succeeded in presenting traditional Shi'ah concepts in a dynamic and socially relevant manner, replacing the passive and sectarian *Safavid* version of Shi'ism with its more active and revolutionary *Alavid* interpretation. Having acknowledged this, however, we wish to emphasize that the launching

of a powerful intellectual movement that has the potential to attract all of mankind towards Islam is an unavoidable prerequisite for bringing about a genuine Islamic Revolution in our age. This intellectual movement is required so as to bring about a real change in the educated elite and intelligentsia of the society, taking them from the darkness of materialism and atheism into the light of *Iman*. We believe that this objective can only be achieved through a cogently reasoned presentation of Islamic beliefs and a strong refutation of atheistic and materialistic philosophies. Moreover, it is vital for us to remember that modern means of communication have made the transfer of information and ideas so swift that the whole world has practically become a small village. As such, the academic level of the required discourse will not be limited to one particular country, rather we need to come up to the highest standard of sophistication found anywhere in the world. The starting point for this colossal task in the 20th century was Allama Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, and some progress was subsequently made in this direction by Dr. Mohammad Rafiuddin (1904-1969). It must be admitted, however, that no substantial work was done in pre-Revolution Iran regarding the reconstruction of Islamic thought at the highest level of intellectual sophistication with the objective of penetrating the brain-trust of the society, and hence the first prerequisite of a genuine revolution was not fulfilled.

Secondly, a true revolution is never achieved by a previously established and entrenched institution, but is always brought about by a new revolutionary party with fresh cadres. In the case of Iran, we find that although a number of different and mutually hostile political groups were involved in the struggle against the monarchy, it was the strong Iranian clergy that was eventually able to take advantage of the anti-Shah climate and succeeded in taking over the reigns of power once the King was forced to flee. The important point here is that the Iranian religious hierarchy was not a newly established revolutionary force, but they, in fact, represented an already established

institution that enjoyed popular support and widespread influence in the Iranian society.

One way to analyze the anti-Shah movement in Iran (January 1978 to February 1979) is to compare it with its contemporary anti-Bhutto movement in Pakistan (January to July, 1977). Both of these movements were aimed at getting rid of an unwanted ruler — Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan. Strictly speaking, neither of these movements was primarily religious in nature, even though religious sentiments did play a significant role in both instances. Our contention regarding the essential similarity between these movements is based on the fact that, in both cases, there was a conglomeration of groups, parties, and leaders with different and even opposite ideologies and aims, but who joined hands only to bring about the downfall of a ruler they all hated, the basis for animosity being different in each case. In the anti-Bhutto movement, there was an admixture of nine discontented groups having widely different and even contradictory ideological and political tendencies which were united under the banner of the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA); these included the Pakistan Muslim League, Tehreek-e-Istiqlal, Jama'at-e-Islami, Jami'yat Ulama-e-Islam, Jami'yat Ulama-e-Pakistan, National Democratic Party, Pakistan Democratic Party, Khaksar Tehreek, and Azad Kashmir Muslim Conference. Similarly, in the anti-Shah uprising in Iran, we find the participation of the National Front (a secular, nationalist party), the Liberation movement (a modernist Shi'ah group), the Tudeh party (a pro-Soviet, communist party), the Fedayeen-e-Khalq (a secular, Marxist group), the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (an Islamic leftist movement), and the orthodox, fundamentalist Shi'ah clergy united under Ayatollah Khomeini. All these parties with conflicting ideologies were unanimous and unified, in both Iran and Pakistan, only in that the existing regime must go.

A noteworthy phenomenon common to both these movements was, when the uprising reached a stage where large-scale sacrifices were required, religion and religious symbols were invoked and

emphasized in both instances to motivate the masses. The anti-Bhutto movement was popularized to the extent that the masses became willing to sacrifice their lives only because the PNA had been using the slogan of *Nizam-e-Mustafa* (the Prophet's Social Order). This was precisely the reason why the leadership of the PNA movement was awarded to a religious personality, the late Maulana Mufti Mahmud, even though it was obvious that other prominent leaders of the PNA — like Air Marshal (Rtd.) Asghar Khan, Pir Pagara, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, or Mualana Shah Ahmad Noorani — would never accept him as their permanent leader and guide. This was, indeed, only a symbolic leadership which had nothing to do with reality. The exact opposite, however, happened in Iran, however, where a charismatic personality was available who commanded the respect of the masses due to his sharp and courageous criticism of the monarchy and its pro-American policies, as well as his uncompromising stand and strong character. Ayatollah Khomeini was, therefore, able to take charge of the rising anti-Shah sentiments. He succeeded in keeping the movement largely non-violent and successfully used the mass discontent in toppling the Shah's regime. In the case of Pakistan, on the other hand, no such leadership was available to take effective charge of the anti-Bhutto movement. As a result, when the Bhutto regime began to weaken, it was the army that took advantage of the situation and came to power in a *coup d'état*, with the PNA leadership watching helplessly. The army announced that it will arrange fresh elections within ninety days, and this snuffed out the mass passion for *Nizam-e-Mustafa*. Thus, there was a *coup* by the army in Pakistan and a *coup* by the clergy in Iran.

It is important to emphasize that the change in Iran was not brought about by a single revolutionary party, rather it was a combination of diverse forces that had struggled against the monarchy. Consequently, there was much discord and dispute concerning Iran's future government, which began immediately after the flight of the Shah. The Liberation Movement wanted an Islamic state governed by a Shi'ah layman; the National Front wanted a secular parliamentary democracy; the Mujahideen-e-Khalq wanted a redistribution of

wealth and an egalitarian Islamic State; the Fedayeen-e-Khalq and Tudeh party looked for another revolution, this time a secular-socialist one; the second most influential Shi'ah cleric, Ayatollah Shariatmadari, had a very different conception of an Islamic State than that held by Ayatollah Khomeini. This post-Revolution pulling and pushing in various directions led to much political and militant maneuvering and bitter conflicts; indeed, the large-scale arrests, incarcerations, and executions of the opponents by the new regime constitute a dark chapter in this saga. Since the change in Iran was not brought about by a single revolutionary party, the clergy in power had no option except to forcefully crush all opposition in order to strengthen their grip on the reins of power and to preclude any possibility of an immediate counter-revolution, the danger of which was quite real due to the presence of numerous competing groups. This provides further support to our position that the change in Iran was not a true Islamic Revolution but a *coup* by the Iranian clergy, as the phenomenal example set by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in announcing general amnesty on the occasion of the Conquest of Makkah was not followed by the new government. The situation would have been totally different had this been a true Islamic Revolution achieved under the guidance and leadership of a single revolutionary party.

The question whether a change similar to that in Iran can be brought about in our own country is now easy to answer. Our reasoned and considered response is: No! The simple fact is that the Iranian Revolution was a *coup* by the clergy, and there are a number of factors in Pakistan that make such a *coup* impossible. Firstly, the division between Shi'ah and Sunni sects is not something that can be easily ignored. In Iran, there was an overwhelming majority of Shi'ah Muslims, almost all of whom were Twelvers. Sunnis constituted a very small minority in Iran, and they too were scattered in the peripheral regions of the country, e.g., the Baluch tribes in the south-east, Kurd and Afghan tribes in the north-east, and some Arab tribes in the province of Ahvaz near the Persian Gulf. In

Pakistan, Shi'ah Muslims constitute a strong and vocal minority and are commingled with Sunni Muslims throughout the country; the situation of sectarian differences is, therefore, quite distinct in our country as compared to that in Iran.

Secondly, there was a powerful and well-graded institution of Shi'ah clergy in Iran that was, so to speak, ready to take over the reins of power once the opportunity arose, but the Sunni *Ulama* in Pakistan are neither organized nor united to do so in a similar situation. It may be noted that the official religion of Iran had been Twelver Shi'ism ever since the era of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1732). The Safavids had sought to foster a distinct religious identity in Iran so as to maintain the population's loyalty in the conflict against the powerful Sunni Ottoman Empire, and for this purpose they had imported Shi'ah *Ulama* from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and provided them with wealth and power. The influence of the Iranian clergy greatly increased during the rule of the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925), as exemplified by their role in the Tobacco Protest of 1891-92 and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11. The Iranian clergy enjoyed a very high standard of religious education, a meticulously determined hierarchical gradation of *Ulama*, and full control over religious endowments as well as over the collection and distribution of *Zakat* and *Khums*. In sharp contrast, the Sunni *Ulama* in Pakistan lack a single organizational setup; they are divided into three main factions — the Deobandi, the Barelvi (both of which follow the Hanafi *fiqh*), and the Ahl Al-Hadith — each of which is further divided into numerous parties. As a result of this fragmentation of Sunni *Ulama* in mutually contentious groups, there is no central personality who can command the respect and obedience of all Sunni *Ulama* belonging to various groups. Moreover, the system of religious education in Pakistan lacks proper gradation and, as such, there is no quality control over the graduates of religious seminaries.

Thirdly, with the exception of a brief period during World War II when the Soviets and

the British had seized parts of this country, Iran had remained independent of any direct political and military control by Western imperialism. This meant that our Iranian brethren had enjoyed full internal freedom to manage their own affairs and to run their religious institutions according to their own traditions, in contrast to the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent who had suffered heavily at the hands of the British. The foreign rulers of India destroyed our legal, educational, and political institutions, and replaced to a large extent our cultural and social values with their own. This meant that while the religious infra-structure was preserved in Iran, it was severely damaged in the Indian subcontinent. As a result of this advantage, the Iranian clergy was able to move swiftly after gaining power and succeeded in implementing its *fiqh* without too much difficulty. In contrast, such a possibility does not exist in Pakistan.

On account of these three factors, therefore, it is clear why it was possible for the Iranian clergy to quickly and effectively stage a successful take-over once the Shah was defeated, and establish a theocratic state in accordance with their religious conceptions, and why such a take-over by the Sunni *Ulama* in Pakistan is out of the question.

As mentioned in the beginning, there is one aspect of the Iranian Revolution that deserves our close attention. We believe this to be the most important lesson of the Iranian Revolution: the fact that, instead of resorting to armed or terrorist activities, the Iranian people succeeded in toppling over the Shah's regime by means of a generally non-violent uprising. Although some segments of the anti-Shah alliance — like the Fedayeen-e-Khalq and the Mujahideen-e-Khalq — did resort to violence and armed assaults on the military, the eventual leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, adopted a strategy of unilateral pacifism which ultimately triumphed against all odds. Khomeini had realized that the key factor in overthrowing the Shah would be the neutralization of the armed forces. He, therefore, appealed to the army and the

police not to obey orders of opening fire on the demonstrators. At the same time, he called on the revolutionaries to remain absolutely peaceful, to confront the soldiers fearlessly, and to demonstrate to them their willingness to die. Ayatollah Khomeini reasoned that an attack on a person in uniform would increase solidarity within the army, whereas allowing the soldiers to kill the peaceful and non-violent demonstrators would demoralize the army, making the soldiers ready to join the revolutionaries, which is exactly what happened.

Describing the role of the unarmed masses in bringing about a revolution, Dr. Suroosh Irfani observes: "In stepping into the streets bristling with tanks and guns, Iranian demonstrators were courting death as the ultimate act of defiance against a state whose legitimacy they were no longer prepared to accept. A defiance that reflected self-transcendence and sacrifice, generating a spirituality that galvanized the masses into demolishing the Pahlavi state. As a movement of the unarmed, Iran's revolution devised its own means for disarming the army. Often, demonstrators inserted red carnations into the gun barrels of impassive soldiers, or cursed them by shaking their fists at them, dabbed in the blood of those whom the soldiers had just killed. Before long, blood began to conquer the gun. The military machine began to crack. The unarmed masses disarmed the army." (Cf., *How the Iranian Revolution Triumphed: The Role of the Unarmed Masses in Dawn Magazine*; October 28, 1994)

This technique of peaceful, non-violent agitation and civil disobedience — consisting of street processions, public rallies, strikes, and sit-ins — was subsequently used by the masses with amazing success during the anti-Marcos insurrection in the Philippines, and during the anti-Communism movements in the former Soviet Union and East Europe. Indeed, the separation of the state and government into two distinct institutions, and the development of the concepts of human rights, democracy, and civil liberty implies that the people can now legitimately present their demands without being considered

traitors of the state, provided they remain absolutely peaceful. In other words, it is now possible to bring about positive and fundamental changes in Muslim societies by means of popular resistance movements, while strictly refraining from all sorts of violence. However, it is important to note that there are a number of essential prerequisites which must be fulfilled before such a movement can be launched. These prerequisites will be discussed later on.

Another related issue that must not be overlooked is that, under the conditions prevailing in Pakistan, a reconciliation between Shi'ah and Sunni Muslims is indispensable for any fruitful and meaningful effort in connection with *Iqamah Al-Deen*. We firmly believe that the establishment of a true Islamic state in Pakistan is impossible unless Shi'ah and Sunni Muslims become unanimous in their demand for the Islamic Order and cooperate with each other in this struggle. It is not possible, of course, to eliminate the numerous and centuries-old disagreements between them — whether these are related to beliefs, historical events, or jurisprudence — but Shi'ah and Sunni Muslims can still pool their resources and work together for a cause that transcends these differences. We believe that the only practicable formula for a Shi'ah-Sunni reconciliation is the one adopted by Iran. The Shi'ah minority in Pakistan should accept for themselves the same constitutional and legal position which is given to the Sunni minority in Iran. In other words, the Shi'ah Muslims should publicly accept that, whenever an Islamic state is established in Pakistan, the public law would be in conformity with the beliefs and concepts of Ahl Al-Sunnah who constitute the majority in our country, while the Shi'ah minority would enjoy total freedom to practice their own *fiqh* in all private and personal matters. It is only on the basis of this formula that Shi'ah and Sunni Muslims in Pakistan will be able to cooperate and collaborate with each other in the struggle to establish *Khilafah*. Otherwise their mutual conflict would continue to remain one of the biggest hurdles in this regard. Moreover, a reconciliation between Shi'ah and Sunni Muslims will not only neutralize and check

all those who are engaged in sectarian terrorism in our country, but will also lead to greater cooperation between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, which is urgently needed to resist the nefarious designs of the New World Order.

According to a tradition reported by Abdullah Ibn Amr Ibn Al-'As (RAA) and narrated by Imam Bayhaqi (RA), Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: Which people's faith please you most? On receiving the reply that they were the angels he said: But why should they not believe when they are with their Lord? It was suggested that they were the prophets, to which he replied: Why should they not believe when revelation comes to them? The people suggested themselves and he said,: Why should you not believe when I am among you? Allah's Messenger (SAW) then said: The people whose faith pleases me most are people who will come after my time who will find sheets containing a Book in whose contents they will believe.

According to a tradition reported by Abu Umamah (RAA) and narrated by Imam Ahmad (RA), Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: Blessed is he who has seen me, but seven times blessed is he who has not seen me but has believed in me.