

13 Iran

Ervand Abrahamian

SECTION 1 The Making of the Modern Iranian State

SECTION 2 Political Economy and Development

SECTION 3 Governance and Policy-Making

SECTION 4 Representation and Participation

SECTION 5 Iranian Politics in Transition

ISBN 978-0-201-30671-3 1x5 24.252.60



© Abbas/Magnum Photos.

Username: Emily Jacobs **Book:** Introduction to Comparative Politics, 6th Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Official Name: Islamic Republic of Iran (Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran)

Location: Middle East (West Asia)

Capital City: Tehran

Population (2010): 66.4 million

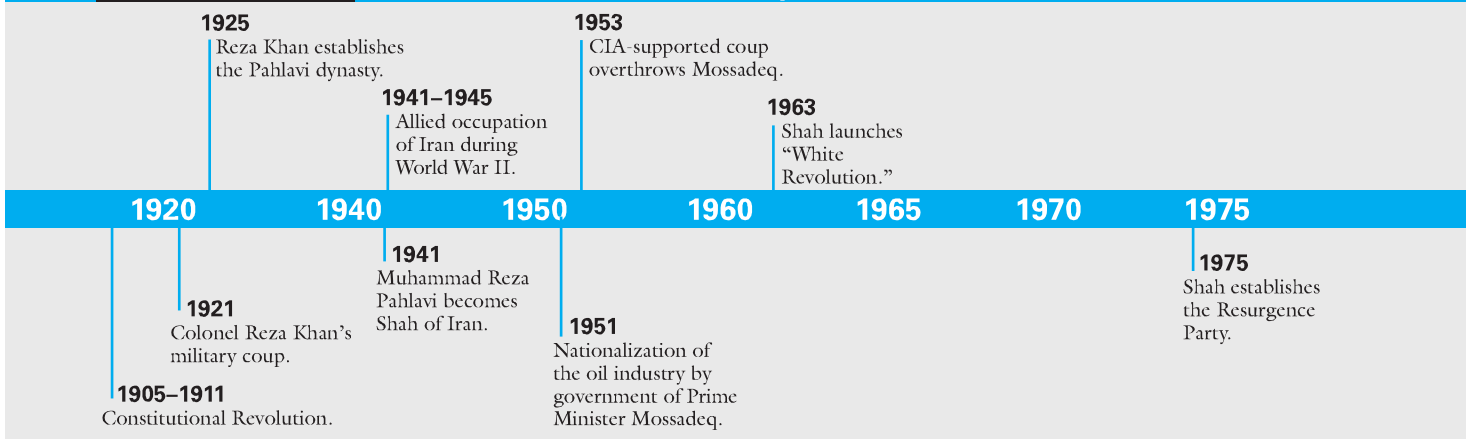
Size: approximately 1,648,000 sq. km.; slightly larger than Alaska



© Cengage Learning

Username: Emily Jacobs **Book:** Introduction to Comparative Politics, 6th Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

CHRONOLOGY of Modern Iran's Political Development



SECTION 1

THE MAKING OF THE MODERN IRANIAN STATE

Focus Questions

To what extent does language, history, and religion give Iran a distinct identity?

How did Muhammad Reza Shah come to power, and what role did the United States play in supporting him?

What led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979?

Who was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and what influence did he have on the Islamic Republic of Iran?

ayatollah

Literally, "sign of God." High-ranking cleric in Iran.

civil society

Refers to the space occupied by voluntary associations outside the state, for example, professional associations, trade unions, and student groups.

Politics in Action

In 1997, Iran elected Muhammad Khatami president of the Islamic Republic. He was reelected in 2001 by an increased majority. Khatami a middle-ranking cleric was not a high-ranking **ayatollah**. He had promised to create a more open **civil society** and improve the country's "sick economy." He stressed the importance of protecting individual liberties, freedom of expression, women's rights, political pluralism, and the rule of law. He even promoted better relations with the United States and other Western nations.

Commentators, inside and outside the country, had considered the election a shoo-in for Khatami's conservative rival. But Khatami won 70 percent of the vote. Once in office, President Khatami liberalized the press, established new political parties, and initiated a "dialogue of civilizations" with the West.

In 2005, Iranian voters again voted for change—in the opposite direction. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the ultraconservative mayor of Tehran, won over 60 percent of the vote. He had promised to reduce poverty, promote social justice, and end corruption. He also promised to reverse many of the liberal changes implemented under Khatami. He denounced the West as "decadent" and took a hard line on relations with the United States and on Israel, which he said should be "wiped off the map." He particularly defended Iran's right to develop nuclear energy, which he claimed would be used only for peaceful purposes. He insisted the United States had no right to tell other nations what types of technology they could develop. Ahmadinejad was reelected in 2009 in a highly controversial election that resulted in mass protests and widespread accusations of ballot rigging.

These very different electoral outcomes illustrate the contradictory political forces at work in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is a mixture of **theocracy** and democracy. Its political system is based on both clerical authority and popular sovereignty, on the divine right of the clergy and the rights of the people, on concepts

Username: Emily Jacobs **Book:** Introduction to Comparative Politics, 6th Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|-------------|--|---|--|
| 1979 Islamic Revolution; Shah forced into exile; Iran becomes an Islamic Republic; Ayatollah Khomeini becomes Leader. | March 1980 Elections for the First Islamic <i>Majles</i> (parliament). Subsequent <i>Majles</i> elections every four years. | | | | 2005 Ultraconservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad elected president. |
| 1979 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 2000 | 2005 |
| 1979–1981 Hostage crisis—52 U.S. embassy employees held by radical students. December 1979 Referendum on the Islamic constitution. | October 1981 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei elected president. January 1980 Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr elected president. 1980–1988 War with Iraq. | | 1989 Khomeini dies; Khamenei appointed Leader; Rafsanjani elected president (reelected in 1993). | 1997 Muhammad Khatami elected president on reform platform (reelected in 2001). | 2009 Ahmadinejad re-elected; large-scale protests against alleged electoral fraud take place in Tehran and other cities. |

derived from early Islam and from modern democratic principles. Iran has regular elections for the presidency and the *Majles* (Parliament), but the clerically dominated **Guardian Council** determines who can run. The president is the formal head of the executive branch. But he can be overruled, even dismissed, by the chief cleric, the **Leader** known in the West as the **Supreme Leader**. The president appoints the minister of justice, but the whole judiciary is under the supervision of the chief judge, who is appointed directly by the Leader. The *Majles* is the legislature, but bills do not become law unless the Guardian Council deems them compatible with Islam and the Islamic constitution.

Geographic Setting

Iran is three times the size of France, slightly larger than Alaska, and much larger than its immediate neighbors. Most of its territory is inhospitable to agriculture. Rain-fed agriculture is confined mostly to the northwest and the provinces along the Caspian Sea. Only pastoral nomads can survive in the semiarid zones and in the high mountain valleys. Thus, 67 percent of the total population of near 66 million is concentrated on 27 percent of the land—mostly in the Caspian region, in the northwest provinces, and in the cities of Tehran, Mashed, Isfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, and Qom.

Iran is the second-largest oil producer in the Middle East and the fourth-largest in the world, and oil revenues have made Iran an urbanized and partly industrialized country. Nearly 68 percent of the population lives in urban centers; 70 percent of the labor force is employed in industry and services; 83 percent of adults are literate; life expectancy has reached over seventy years; and the majority of Iranians enjoy a standard of living well above that found in most of Asia and Africa. Iran can no longer be described as a typically poor underdeveloped Third World country. It is a middle-income country with a per capita income above that of Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa.

Iran lies on the strategic crossroads between Central Asia and Turkey, between the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, and between the Arabian Peninsula and the Caucasus Mountains, which are often considered a boundary between Europe and Asia. This has made the region vulnerable to invaders.

The population today reflects these historic invasions. Some 51 percent speak Persian (**Farsi**), an Indo-European language, as their first language; 26 percent speak dialects of Turkic, mainly Azeri and Turkman; 8 percent speak Gilaki or Mazandarani, distinct Persian dialects; 7 percent speak Kurdish, another Indo-European language; and 3 percent speak Arabic. Use of Persian, however, has dramatically increased

theocracy

A state dominated by the clergy, who rule on the grounds that they are the only interpreters of God's will and law.

Majles

The Iranian parliament, from the Arabic term for "assembly."

Guardian Council

A committee created in the Iranian constitution to oversee the *Majles* (the parliament).

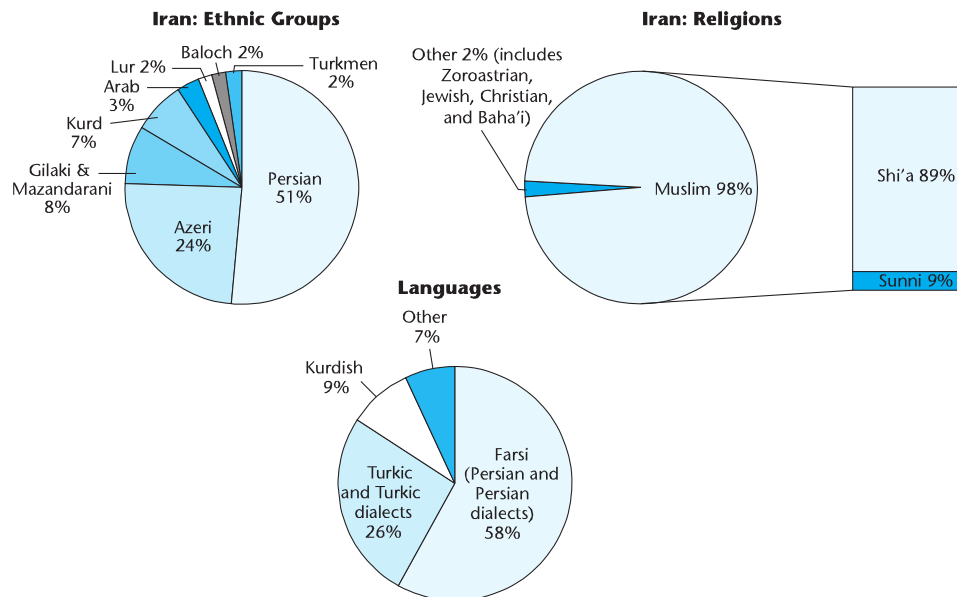
Leader/Supreme Leader

A cleric elected to be the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Farsi

Persian word for the Persian language. Fars is a province in Central Iran.

| Table 13.1 Political Organization | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Political System | A mixture of democracy and theocracy (rule of the clergy) headed by a cleric with the title of the Leader. |
| Regime History | Islamic Republic since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. |
| Administrative Structure | Centralized administration with 30 provinces. The interior minister appoints the provincial governor-generals. |
| Executive | President and his cabinet. The president is chosen by the general electorate every four years. The president chooses his cabinet ministers, but they need to obtain the approval of the Majles (parliament). |
| Legislature | Unicameral. The Majles, formed of 290 seats, is elected every four years. It has multiple-member districts with the top runners in the elections taking the seats. Bills passed by the Majles do not become law unless they have the approval of the clerically dominated Council of Guardians. |
| Judiciary | A Chief Judge and a Supreme Court independent of the executive and legislature but appointed by the Leader. |
| Party System | The ruling clergy restricts most party and organizational activities. |



Iranian Currency

Rial (ریال)
 International Designation: IRR
 Exchange Rate (2010): US\$1 = 10,308
 1000 Rial Note Design: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), Supreme Leader (1979–1989)



© Oleg_Mir/Shutterstock.com

FIGURE 13.1 The Iranian Nation at a Glance



© Cengage Learning

in recent years because of successful literacy campaigns. Over 90 percent of the population can now communicate in Persian, the national language. Although Iran shares many religious and cultural features with the rest of the Middle East, its Persian heritage gives it a national identity distinct from that of the Arab and Turkish world. Iranians by no means consider themselves part of the Arab world.

Critical Junctures

The Safavids (1501–1722)

The Safavid dynasty conquered the territory that is now Iran in the sixteenth century and forcibly converted their subjects to Shi'ism, even though the vast majority had been Sunnis. By the mid-seventeenth century, Sunnism survived only among the tribal groups at the periphery.

Safavid Iran also contained small communities of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians. The Safavids tolerated religious minorities as long as they paid special taxes and accepted royal authority. According to Islam, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were to be tolerated as legitimate **People of the Book**, because they were mentioned in the Holy **Qur'an** and possessed their own sacred texts: the Bible, the Torah, and the Avesta.

People of the Book

The Muslim term for recognized religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.

Qur'an

The Muslim Bible.

THE GLOBAL CONNECTION



Islam and Shi'ism

Islam, with over 1 billion adherents, is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity. Islam means literally “submission to God,” and a Muslim is someone who has submitted to God—the same God that Jews and Christians worship. Islam has one central tenet: “There is only one God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.” Muslims, in order to consider themselves faithful, need to perform the following four duties to the best of their ability: give to charity; pray every day facing Mecca, where Abraham is believed to have built the first place of worship; make a pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime to Mecca, which is located in modern Saudi Arabia; and fast during the daytime hours in the month of Ramadan to commemorate God’s revelation of the Qur’an (Koran, or Holy Book) to the Prophet Muhammad. These four, together with the central tenet, are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

From its earliest days, Islam has been divided into two major branches: Sunni, meaning literally “followers of tradition,” and Shi’i, literally “partisans of Ali.” Sunnis are by far in the majority worldwide. Shi’is constitute less than 10 percent of Muslims worldwide and are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq, Bahrain, eastern Turkey, Azerbaijan, and southern Lebanon.

Although both branches accept the Five Pillars, they differ mostly over who should have succeeded the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). The Sunnis recognized the early dynasties that ruled the Islamic empire with the exalted title of caliph (“Prophet’s Deputy”). The Shi’is, however, argued that as soon as the Prophet died, his authority should have been passed on to Imam Ali, the Prophet’s close companion, disciple, and son-in-law. They further argue that Imam Ali passed his authority to his direct male heirs, the third of whom, Imam Husayn, had been martyred fighting the Sunnis in 680, and the twelfth of whom had supposedly gone into hiding in 941.

The Shi’is are also known as Twelvers since they follow the Twelve Imams. They refer to the Twelfth Imam as the *Mahdi*, the Hidden Imam, and believe him to be the Messiah who will herald the end of the world. Furthermore, they argue that in his absence, the authority to interpret the *shari’a* (religious law) should be in the hands of the senior clerical scholars—the ayatollahs. Thus, from the beginning, the Shi’is harbored ambivalent attitudes toward the state, especially if the rulers were Sunnis or lacked genealogical links to the Twelve Imams. For Sunnis, the *shari’a* is based mostly on the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet. For Shi’is, it is based also on the teachings of the Twelve Imams.

shari’a

Islamic law derived mostly from the Qur’an and the examples set by the Prophet Muhammad.

The Safavids governed through Persian scribes and Shi’i clerics as well as through tribal chiefs, large landowners, religious notables, city merchants, guild elders, and urban ward leaders.

The Safavid army was formed mostly of tribal cavalry led by tribal chieftains. Safavid revenues came mostly from land taxes levied on the peasantry. The Safavids claimed absolute power, but they lacked a central state and had to cooperate with many semi-independent local leaders.

5814260 2013/06/12 165.24.252.60

The Qajars (1794–1925)

In 1722 Afghan tribesmen invaded the capital. After a half-century of civil war the Qajars—a Turkic-speaking Shi’i tribe—reconquered much of Iran. They moved the capital to Tehran and recreated the Safavid system of central manipulation and court administration. They also declared Shi’ism to be the state religion, even though they, unlike the Safavids, did not boast of genealogical links to the Twelve Imams. Since these new shahs, or kings, did not pretend to wear the Imam’s mantle, Shi’i clerical leaders could claim to be the main interpreters of Islam.

Qajar rule coincided with the peak of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. The Russians seized parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus region from Iran and extracted major economic concessions. The British Imperial Bank won the monopoly to issue paper money. The Indo-European Telegraph Company got a contract to extend communication lines throughout the country. Exclusive rights to drill

for oil in the southwest were sold to a British citizen. Iranians increasingly felt their whole country had been auctioned off.

These resentments led to the constitutional revolution of 1905–1909. The 1906 constitution introduced elections, separation of powers, laws made by a legislative assembly, and the concepts of popular sovereignty and the nation (*mellat*). It retained the monarchy, but centered political power in a national assembly called the *Majles*.

The constitution gave the *Majles* extensive authority over all laws, budgets, treaties, loans, concessions, and the make-up of the cabinet. The ministers were accountable to the *Majles*, not to the shah. The constitution also included a bill of rights guaranteeing equality before the law, protection of life and property, safeguards from arbitrary arrest, and freedom of expression and association.

Shi'ism was declared Iran's official religion. Clerical courts continued to implement the *shari'a*. A Guardian Council of senior clerics elected by the *Majles* had veto power over parliamentary bills it deemed un-Islamic.

The initial euphoria soon gave way to deep disillusionment. Pressures from the European powers continued, and a devastating famine after World War I took some 1 million lives, almost 10 percent of the total population. Internal conflicts polarized the *Majles* into warring liberal and conservative factions. Liberals, mostly members of the intelligentsia, championed social reforms, especially the replacement of the *shari'a* with a modern legal code. Conservatives, led by landlords, tribal chiefs, and senior clerics, vehemently opposed such reforms, particularly land reform, women's rights, and the granting of full equality to religious minorities.

The central government, without any real army, bureaucracy, or tax-collecting machinery, could not administer the provinces. During World War I, Russia and Britain formally carved up Iran into three zones. Russia occupied the north, Britain the south. Iran was left with a small middle "neutral zone."

By 1921, Iran was in complete disarray. According to a British diplomat, the propertied classes, fearful of communism, were anxiously seeking "a savior on horseback."¹

The Pahlavis (1925–1979)

In February 1921 Colonel Reza Khan carried out a **coup d'état**. He replaced the cabinet and consolidated power in his own hands. Four years later, he deposed the Qajars and crowned himself shah-in-shah—king of kings—and established the Pahlavi dynasty. This was the first nontribal dynasty to rule the whole of Iran.

Reza Shah ruled with an iron fist until 1941, when the British and the Soviets invaded Iran to stop Nazi Germany from establishing a foothold there. Reza Shah promptly abdicated in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, and went into exile, where he soon died. In the first twelve years of his reign, the young shah retained control over the armed forces but had to tolerate a free press, an independent judiciary, competitive elections, assertive cabinet ministers, and boisterous parliaments. He also had to confront two vigorous political movements: the communist Tudeh (Masses) Party and the National Front, led by the charismatic Dr. Muhammad Mossadeq (1882–1967).

The Tudeh drew its support mostly from working-class trade unions. The National Front drew its support mainly from the salaried middle classes and campaigned to nationalize the British company that controlled the petroleum industry. Mossadeq also wanted to sever the shah's links with the armed forces. In 1951, Mossadeq was elected prime minister and promptly nationalized the oil industry. The period of relative freedom, however, ended abruptly in 1953, when royalist army officers overthrew

coup d'état

A forceful, extra-constitutional action resulting in the removal of an existing government, usually carried out by the military.

Mossadeq and installed the shah with absolute power. The coup was financed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British. This intensified anti-British sentiment and created a deep distrust of the United States. It also made the shah appear to be a puppet of foreign powers.

The Pahlavi dynasty built Iran's first highly centralized state. The armed forces grew from fewer than 40,000 in 1925 to 124,000 in 1941, and to over 410,000 in 1979. The armed forces were supplemented by a pervasive secret police known as SAVAK.

Iran's bureaucracy expanded to twenty-one ministries employing over 300,000 civil servants in 1979. The Education Ministry grew twentyfold. The powerful Interior Ministry appointed provincial governors, town mayors, district superintendents, and village headmen; it could even rig *Majles* elections and create rubber-stamp parliaments.

The Justice Ministry supplanted the *shari'a* with a European-style civil code and the clerical courts with a modern judicial system culminating in a Supreme Court. The Transport Ministry built an impressive array of bridges, ports, highways, and railroads known as the Trans-Iranian Railway. The Ministry of Industries financed numerous factories specializing in consumer goods. The Agricultural Ministry became prominent in 1963 when the shah made land reform the centerpiece of his "White Revolution." This White Revolution was an effort to promote economic development and such social reform as extending the vote to women. It also created a Literacy Corps for the countryside. Thus, by the late 1970s, the state had set up a modern system of communications, initiated a minor industrial revolution, and extended its reach into even the most outlying villages.

The state also controlled the National and the Central Banks; the Industrial and Mining Development Bank; the Plan Organization in charge of economic policy; the national radio-television network; and most important, the National Iranian Oil Company.

The dynasty's founder, Reza Shah, had used coercion, confiscation, and diversion of irrigation water to make himself one of the largest landowners in the Middle East. This wealth transformed the shah's imperial court into a large military-landed complex, providing work for thousands in its numerous palaces, hotels, casinos, charities, companies, and beach resorts. This patronage system grew under his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, particularly after he established his tax-exempt Pahlavi Foundation, which eventually controlled 207 large companies.

The Pahlavi drive for secularization, centralization, industrialization, and social development won some favor from the urban propertied classes. But arbitrary rule; the 1953 coup that overthrew a popular prime minister; the disregard for constitutional liberties; and the stifling of independent newspapers, political parties, and professional associations produced widespread resentment. The Pahlavi state, like the Safavids and the Qajars, hovered over, rather than embedded itself into, Iranian society.

In 1975, the shah formed the Resurgence Party. He declared Iran a one-party state and threatened imprisonment and exile to those refusing to join the party. The Resurgence Party was designed to create yet another organizational link with the population, especially with the **bazaars** (traditional marketplaces), which, unlike the rest of society, had managed to retain their independent guilds and thus escape direct government control. The Resurgence Party promptly established its own bazaar guilds as well as newspapers, women's organizations, professional associations, and labor unions. It also prepared to create a Religious Corps to teach the peasants "true Islam."

bazaar

An urban marketplace where shops, workshops, small businesses, and export-importers are located.

The Islamic Revolution (1979)

These grievances were best summed up by an exile newspaper in Paris on the very eve of the 1979 revolution. In an article entitled “Fifty Years of Treason,” it charged the shah and his family with establishing a military dictatorship; collaborating with the CIA; trampling on the constitution; creating SAVAK, the secret police; rigging parliamentary elections; organizing a fascistic one-party state; taking over the religious establishment; and undermining national identity by disseminating Western culture. It also accused the regime of inducing millions of landless peasants to migrate into urban shantytowns; widening the gap between rich and poor; funneling money away from the middle class bourgeoisie into the pockets of the wealthy comprador bourgeoisie (entrepreneurs linked to foreign companies and multinational corporations); wasting resources on bloated military budgets; and granting new capitulations to the West.

These grievances took sharper edge when the leading opposition cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—exiled in Iraq—formulated a new version of Shi’ism (see Profile: “Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini”). His version of Shi’ism has often been labeled Islamic **fundamentalism**. It would be better to call it **political Islam** or even more accurately as Shi’i populism. The term *fundamentalism*, derived from American Protestantism, implies religious dogmatism, intellectual inflexibility and purity, political traditionalism, social conservatism, rejection of the modern world, and the literal interpretation of scriptural texts. While Khomeinism shares some of these characteristics, Khomeini was not so much a social conservative as a political revolutionary who rallied the people of Iran against a decadent elite.

Khomeini denounced monarchies in general as part of the corrupt elite exploiting the oppressed masses. Oppressors were courtiers, large landowners, high-ranking military officers, wealthy foreign-connected capitalists, and millionaire palace dwellers. The oppressed were the masses, especially landless peasants, wage earners, bazaar shopkeepers, and shantytown dwellers.

Khomeini gave a radically new meaning to the old Shi’i term *velayat-e faqih* (**jurist’s guardianship**). He argued that jurist’s guardianship gave the senior clergy all-encompassing authority over the whole community, not just over widows, minors, and the mentally disabled (the previous interpretation). Only the senior clerics could understand the *shari’a*; the divine authority given to the Prophet and the Imams had been passed on to their spiritual heirs, the clergy. He further insisted the clergy were the people’s true representatives, since they lived among them, listened to their problems, and shared their everyday joys and pains. He claimed that the shah secretly planned to confiscate all religious endowment funds and replace Islamic values with “cultural imperialism.”

In 1977–1978, the shah tried to deal with a 20 percent rise in consumer prices and a 10 percent decline in oil revenues by cutting construction projects and declaring war against “profiteers,” “hoarders,” and “price gougers.” Shopkeepers believed the shah was diverting attention from court corruption and planning to replace them with government-run department stores. They also ~~thought he intended to destroy~~ the bazaar.

The shah was also subjected to international pressure on the sensitive issue of human rights—from Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the Western press, as well as from the recently elected Carter administration in the United States. In 1977, the shah gave the International Red Cross access to Iranian prisons and permitted political prisoners to have defense attorneys. This international pressure allowed the opposition to breathe again after decades of suffocation.²

fundamentalism

A term recently popularized to describe radical religious movements throughout the world.

political Islam

A term for the intermingling of religion with politics and often used as a substitute for fundamentalism.

jurist’s guardianship

Khomeini’s concept that the Iranian clergy should rule on the grounds that they are the divinely appointed guardians of both the law and the people.