

## CHAPTER NINE

*Conclusion: A Century of Reform and Revolution*

In describing events and stating the necessities of the moment, write that this is the time for reform, that if it does not take place things will be bad, and that the dangers and difficulties will increase.<sup>1</sup>

The 2nd Khordad was a turning point in the history of Iran, and in my opinion this cannot be analysed within the framework of the Islamic Revolution. As such, it is neither a movement against the Revolution, nor a return to it. The 2nd Khordad is a product of real and intellectual changes.<sup>2</sup>

We have the bitter experience of the Constitutional Revolution. We had had the intention of building a society in which the people possessed rights in which a government would emanate from the desires and opinions of the people, being responsible to the people. However, unfortunately, something else happened. Two groups, who happened to occupy conflicting poles, conjoined to defeat the Constitutional movement: those, who in the name of religion were against the right of the people to govern themselves and their destiny, and those who in the name of freedom, were against religion; working together they destroyed the Constitution. The consequence of the actions of those who opposed religion and freedom of the people, was that from the heart of the Constitutional Movement emerged the arrogant government of the Pahlavi's, which crushed both religion and freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The election of Mohammad Khatami to the Presidency of the Islamic Republic in May 1997 was the culmination of a decade of social and intellectual agitation which sought to define the legacy of the Islamic Revolution as distinct from the centralising and autocratic tendencies of the 'state', and refocus towards the needs, desires and 'rights' of society. It was a definitive move away from the 'obligations' of subjects and in favour of the 'rights' of citizens. However, for the broad political tendency known as the Reformist Movement, the second Khordad was a much more historic event, a worthy successor to the social upheaval of the

Islamic Revolution, which was itself a the product of nearly a century of political activism reflecting the erratic if dramatic emergence of mass political consciousness. For Reformist intellectuals, the twentieth century (or the continuing fourteenth century, in the Persian solar calendar) had been witness to an ongoing struggle between the dominance of the state – often personalised by an autocrat – and the rights of the individual, with those rights inevitably becoming subjected to the will of the autocrat. The Constitutional Movement eventually disintegrated into the autocracy of Reza Shah, himself the product of the intellectual desperation with the perceived anarchism of Iranian society, while the National Front of Dr Mosaddeq collapsed in the face of foreign pressures capitalising, yet again, on social weakness. The legacy of the Islamic Revolution, it is argued, similarly risks being squandered if its social gains are not both institutionalised and socialised, so that they become the norm rather than the exception.

This process has been pursued with vigour and varying degrees of prudence by the advocates of reform, including the President himself, acutely aware of the potency of reaction. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, while elections are not yet 'free' in the Western understanding of the term, they are certainly more free than they have been at any other time in modern Iranian history, with an electorate that is increasingly sophisticated and sceptical.<sup>4</sup> The universities promote active discussion of key political and social issues, while the press, the pillar of Khatami's 'civil society', remains vibrant, despite the continued opposition of the authoritarian wing within the establishment. Indeed, despite the difficulties facing the Khatami administration and the frictions within the Reformist Movement itself, there can be little doubt that a social and intellectual revolution is transforming the relationship between Iranian society and the state. What distinguishes and in many ways propels this transformation, in contrast to the previous experiences of political awakening, are the substantial material changes which underpin it. In this respect, the continuing transformation is not simply a consequence of a process of 'enlightenment', but is founded on social and political changes inherited from the Pahlavis. There is considerable truth in the statement attributed to a former soldier in the army of Reza Shah, long since retired, who berated the young, somewhat idealistic revolutionaries who had burst through his front door during the upheaval of the Islamic Revolution with the admonition that their 'revolution' had been made possible by the 'revolution' initiated by Reza Shah some 50 years earlier. The development of the modern state, telecommunications, education and population growth are all consequences, flawed as they may be, of the Pahlavi drive towards a particular modernisation of the Iranian state.

Yet this particular conception reminds us that while the momentum for change is gathering, the friction inherent in any such process testifies against any smooth transformation. Experience would suggest otherwise. The process of change remains a contest between differing tendencies and vested interests, and while some structural determinants (such as the spread of education) may promote change, others

1. Amin al Dawleh, Private Secretary to Nasir ed Din Shah, to Malkam Khan, August 1882. Quoted in Bakhash, *Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy and Reform*, p. 216.

2. A. Abdi interviewed in *Beem-ha va Omid-ha* (Fears and Expectations), Hamshahri, Tehran, 1378, p. 138.

3. M. Khatami, *Mardomsalari* (Democracy), Tar-e No, Tehran, 1380 / 2001–2002, p. 14.

4. For a detailed analysis of this process and associated arguments, see Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy*.

(such as mercantilism) may constrain and indeed oppose it. At the same time, structures in the absence of ideas cannot instigate change. The idea of what should constitute the modern Iranian state remains contested. The Pahlavi state, for all its modern pretensions, appeared a curious amalgam of traditional monarchical structures rationalised, and arguably made too efficient, by an over-enthusiastic appropriation of Western ideas. Indeed, despite its persistent association with ancient Persian symbols of monarchy, the development of the state seemed to be wholly justified and legitimised on Western grounds. Modernisation appeared to many Iranians to be synonymous with Westernisation, and any distinctly Iranian narrative justification and explanation of the modern Iranian historical experience was abandoned in the determined rush to 'catch up with the West'. In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution the opposite tendency, with an emphasis on the Islamic inheritance, came to the fore, relegating the 'Western' narrative to the margins. As Iranian intellectuals have since argued, both these approaches are flawed and have resulted in 'fragile states'. The noted Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush has been a key spokesperson in addressing this problem, pointing out that:

We Iranian Muslims are the inheritors and the carriers of three cultures at once. As long as we ignore our links with the elements of our triple cultural heritage and our cultural geography, constructive social and cultural action will elude us . . . The three cultures that form our common heritage are of national, religious and Western origins. While steeped in an ancient national culture, we are also immersed in our religious culture, and we are at the same time awash in successive waves coming from the Western shores. Whatever solutions that we divine for our problems must come from this mixed heritage to which our contemporary social thinkers, reformers and modernisers have been heirs, often seeking the salvation of our people in the hegemony of one of these cultures over the other two.<sup>5</sup>

Herein lies the real revolution at the heart of modern Iranian political development – the creation of a distinctive narrative founded on a rigorous interpretation of indigenous historical experience. While the Pahlavi's sought to situate themselves within a Western historical tradition, suggesting that Islam had separated Iran from its natural place alongside its European brethren, and the early Islamic Republic argued for an authentic Islamic inheritance, the 1990s witnessed a growing synthesis of historical ideas based on Iranian experiences with selective acquisitions from the Islamic and Western traditions. These traditions are being appropriated and modified to provide Iranians with a distinctive Iranian *national* historical narrative.<sup>6</sup> This 'historiographical revolution' and the creation of a distinctly 'national' grand narrative is both a product of social and political developments and a key influence on the nature and direction of that process. It is the ghost of the Constitutional Revolution and the spectre of Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq which haunt

modern Iranian politics; the more recent experience of (near total) war has provided Iranians with the 'martial history' it had so conspicuously lacked. In future, patriotism and sacrifice will be encouraged by remembering the reconquest of Khorramshahr, rather than by relying exclusively on narrative reconstructions of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala. Similarly, not only has education awakened Iranians to an interest in literary history, but this interest has been sharpened by the turbulent and sometimes traumatic nature of recent events. As in the West, politics has made history important. But unlike the West, a political settlement has yet to be concluded. As a consequence, 'Iranian History' and its interpretation remain intensely political and highly contested in contemporary Iran.

To understand modern Iranians as they understand themselves, one must become familiar with the historical experiences which influence their thoughts and actions. This emergent grand narrative, like the politics it reflects, continues to be dynamic and contested. It has yet to resolve the contradictions which at once permeate and drive it. It is in the process of formation. This internal dynamic also has an international dimension, since in appropriating Western traditions, this developing grand narrative seeks to integrate itself within an international framework.<sup>7</sup> But this integration demands a new relationship. In defining its history, modern Iran is reinventing its identity, and the corollary of this development is a redefinition of its international relationships. Since this reinvention is yet to reach fruition (though the outlines are already apparent), it follows that international relations risk being frustrated by continual miscomprehension (some of which is undoubtedly wilful). This tendency was most visibly expressed in President Khatami's decision to visit and pay his respects at the tomb of Jean Jacques Rousseau in the Pantheon in Paris. In so doing, Khatami was signalling Iran's debt to the French Revolution, although few observers appreciated this, nor understood the nature of the debt. Instead commentators were quick to point out the apparent incongruity of a cleric paying his respects at the tomb of the ideological father of French revolutionary secularism. For many in the West this was simply another example of the confusing panoply of modern Iran and its frustrating, often contradictory, complexity. This failure to communicate is, of course, nothing new. In 1926, at the height of British power in the Middle East, the British Minister in Iran, Sir Percy Lorraine, recalled a meeting a few years previously with the then Reza Khan, during which he complained bitterly about his inability to communicate effectively with Iranian officials. He noted that he simply could not make them 'understand'. After listening patiently to Lorraine, Reza Khan responded with a Persian saying, which according to Lorraine 'completely disarmed me', and indeed belied his 'total lack of Western education'. 'When a wise man argues with a fool', Reza Khan noted, 'the greater part of the blame lies with the wise man.'<sup>8</sup> The reader may judge who was the 'wise man' and who the 'fool'.

5. A. Soroush, 'The Three Cultures', in A. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, M. Sadri and A. Sadri (trans. and eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 156.

6. Key to this has been the appropriation of 'democracy'. Not all appropriations are without error, however. Relating the importance of the *Magna Carta* to the development of 'constitutionalism', Hajarian erroneously names the monarch as 'Charles II'. See S. Hajarian, *Jomhuriyat: Asmizadace* (The Islamic Republic: A Study of its Origins and Development), Tehran: Farzaneh, 2000, p. 215.

7. The clearest example of this process of integration is the development of 'religious democracy', modelled (with supreme irony) on the experience of the United States as defined by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.

8. FC 271.14481.F207.1, British document of Percy Lorraine to Dorey Sheh, dated 18 January 1926.

## Guide to Further Research

The literature available for the study of modern Iran is extensive and growing, reflecting the increase in scholarship both in the West and in Iran itself. The standard texts on twentieth-century Iran, reflecting Marxian and Weberian outlooks respectively, remain Abrahamian's *Iran Between Two Revolutions* and Arjomand's *The Turban for the Crown*, although these are now being complemented, if not entirely superseded, by a plethora of other publications including extremely valuable detailed monographs and studies in academic journals. In archival terms, the historians of modern Iran find themselves increasingly spoilt for choice, if not daunted by the extent of the resources being made available, in particular in Iran, and which have yet to be seriously studied, certainly by historians resident outside the country. One of the unforeseen consequences of the Islamic Revolution is the enormous variety of private papers seized, largely intact, from the estates of those now out of favour with the new regime. To these must be added the organisation and effective cataloguing of state papers held mainly in the National Archives and the Foreign Ministry archives, many of which are now being published in thematic volumes. The bureaucratic ethic, so frustrating to foreigners and Iranians alike, may prove a godsend to future historians. In addition to the Iranian archives, there are substantial reserves of documents in both Europe and the United States. The British archives (Public Record Office and the India Office [now in the British Library]) remain invaluable for studies up to 1951, while new opportunities exist in the Russian archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Restrictions do exist on the availability of documents, and while many Iranian documents to 1978 are accessible there is a standard 30- to 40-year embargo on most archival sources with obvious consequences for the study of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. To some extent, this shortfall is compensated for by memoirs and sources such as the BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts* and newspapers. Since 1997 the Iranian press has remained a vital and essential (if neglected) resource for the study of contemporary developments.

### ARCHIVAL SOURCES IN IRAN

Only the major archives are listed. In addition to the substantial resources in the National Library and the Majlis Library, there are libraries in the various Ministries (such as Oil), as well as other state organisations, such as the Central Bank ([www.nli.ir](http://www.nli.ir)).

#### *National Archives of Iran (Sazman-e asnad-e melli-e Iran)*

Founded before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, this organisation is the main centre for the collection, cataloguing and organisation of state documents. All ministries and other governmental organisations are required by law to deposit all documents over 40 years old in the archives, and most are made available to bona fide researchers. Only a fraction of the documents have been catalogued (available on a computer database), and while this remains a substantial figure (over one million), there are an estimated 200 million separate documents, largely from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which have yet to be catalogued. Branches of the archives are located in Tehran, as well as Isfahan, Tabriz, Yazd, Kerman, Zahedan and Hamedan. The organisation is administered by the Office of the Presidency (currently being merged with the National Library).

#### *Documentation Centre of the Presidency (Markaz-e Asnad Riyasat-Jomhuri)*

The Centre is host to documents from the Ministry of Court from the accession of Reza Shah to the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. Most have been catalogued and many have been published. Also administered by the Office of the Presidency.

#### *Documentation Centre of the Organisation for Islamic Propagation (Markaz-e Asnad-e Sazman-e Tabliqat-e Islami)*

Contains private collections (books and papers) acquired or seized from private estates after the Islamic Revolution. Many of these collections have since been transferred to the Documentation Centre of the Institute for Contemporary History.

#### *Documentation Centre of the Institute for Contemporary History (Markaz-e Asnad-e Moasseseh-ye Tarikh-e Moaser)*

Private papers seized from the estates of those who left Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. Many have been published. Administered by the Foundation of the Oppressed.

#### *Documentation Centre of the Foreign Ministry (Markaz-e Asnad Vezarat-e Omor-e Kharejeh)*

One of the best organised archival centres in Iran, maintaining documents on Iran's foreign relations since the Safavid era.

#### *Documentation Centre of the Library of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Markaz-e Asnad-e Ketabkhane-ye Majlis Shora-ye Eslami)*

Host to parliamentary papers from the period of the Constitutional Revolution (1906) to the present day. Contains particularly important documents on the era of the Constitutional Revolution.

*Documentation Centre of the Islamic Revolution (Markaz-e Asnad Enqelab-e Islami)*

Contains documents pertaining to the former state security agency SAVAK. Many have been published in various collections. Administered under the supervision of the Ministry of Intelligence.

*Documentation Centre of the Central Library of the University of Tehran (Markaz-e Asnad-e Ketabkhane-ye Markazi-e Daneshgah-ye Tehran)*

A variety of documents relating to political, cultural and social matters. Particularly important for documents relating to the foundation and development of higher education in Iran. The university libraries also maintain significant collections of Persian language newspapers and periodicals.

## Select Bibliography

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