

American portrait of the Iranian Revolution

Part I: Do the Moslem Mullahs really run Iran?

By T.D. Allman

(Editors note: The Iranian revolution was one of the most important political events of the decade. It not only toppled the United States' number one ally in the Middle East, but has catapulted America into an energy crisis that will probably be felt for the remainder of the century. It has also unleashed a wave of Islamic revival that could charge the face of the geo-political globe.)

T.D. Allman, a contributing editor to Harpers magazine, who has covered the Middle East and Asia since the 1960s, travelled throughout Iran, compiling what is probably the most accurate and detailed portrait of Iran that has been made available to the American people. Writing prior to the current take-over of the American Embassy, Allman saw aspects of Iranian life now closed to foreign journalists.)

QUM, IRAN (PNS)--Has one dictatorship replaced another in Iran? Have the Ayatollah Khomeini and his mullahs created a totalitarian theocracy as absolute as the secular police state once run by the Shah and SAVAK?

The immense secular influence the

Moslem clerics--ranging from Khomeini himself down to the village mullah.

On the least harmful level, Akoundism arises when the local mullah simply gets too big for his britches and starts interfering in his neighbors' lives too much. It takes a more serious form when a prominent cleric turns himself into an Islamic Pharisee--flaunting his piety at the mosque while using his power to enrich his family and deny the rights of others. At its worst, Akoundism becomes what Iranians call "counter-revolutionary activity" actions which not only violate clerical ethics, but bring the Islamic religion itself into disrepute.

How do Iranians deal with Akoundism? At the lowest level the weapon is ridicule, social ostracism and, in some villages, running the Akound out of town. More serious offenders, especially those holding powerful offices, are attacked at public meetings and in the press, and sometimes dismissed from office. And in the worst cases, if the Government does not issue an arrest warrant, individuals take matters into their own hands. Since the triumph of the Islamic revolution here, a

has warned that Akoundism could defeat the revolution.

For the moment, the primary danger to Iran's stability is that the Akounds will wreck the Iranian economy by driving out skilled workers and managers with their repression of secular life styles. They could bankrupt Islam itself as a positive force by their attacks on progressive Islamic groups, and they may even provoke civil war through repression of the leftists and the ethnic and religious minorities.

While that danger has been emphasized, even over-rated, by many observers, there also has been a tendency to under-rate the effectiveness of opposition, both open and indirect, to unbridled theocracy. Khomeini himself, for one thing, commands the unquestioning loyalty of far less than the 95 percent of the population many assume. More than a third of Iran's 35 million people are either not members of his Shi'ite sect or are not native speakers of Farsi, the language in which he preaches, or both. Typical are the Arabs of oil-producing Khuzistan province. They are Shi'ites, but they oppose Khomeini because they regard him as a Persian chauvinist. When opposition from his fellow Farsi-speaking Shi'ites--ranging from communists to religious rivals more orthodox than he--is counted in, the proportion of his following drops again.

Perhaps two-thirds of all Iranians do support the Ayatollah with personal fervor, but as the symbol of successful revolution, not as a political leader with a specific program. When controversial issues come up, the majority becomes much more tenuous.

He has banned liquor from restaurants, music from the radio and Iranian women--though not Charlie's Angeles--from performing on TV--while often leaving implementation of Koranic custom to local committees, who disregard it as they wish. And while constantly quoting the Koran's support for private property, Khomeini has approved measures to nationalize the banks, insurance companies, heavy industry and even undeveloped land within city limits--which as a check on real estate speculation is probably the most revolutionary of all measures for Iran's urban poor.

Although the Koran stipulates that those who do not work should not be paid, the massive social security system Khomeini's revolutionary council set up has already transferred several billion dollars to workers left jobless by cancellation of the Shah's building contracts.

Far from turning Iran into the base camp for an Islamic holy war, Khomeini has done away with the draft and cut military expenditures in half.

The prospects for a total victory for Akoundism in Iran--if indeed that is what Khomeini wants, and the signs are very contradictory--are also limited by the nature of Shi'ite Islam itself. Congregations choose--and rid themselves--of mullahs when and as they wish. As for the Ayatollahs--the numbers of which are expanding as rapidly under Islam as courtiers once proliferated under the Shah--no one either hires or fires them. A man becomes an Ayatollah simply by being accepted as one. Indeed all that differentiates the devout layman, the robed mullah, the revered Ayatollah and an exalted Imam--holder of the highest spiritual dignity of all, and the title by which Iranians refer to Khomeini--is that each variously is esteemed as such.

Khomeini--as Imam--enjoys no explicit hierarchical authority over another Ayatollah or even over the lowliest village mullah. Only respect for his piety can make them obey. This is because, at the most basic level, Khomeini--unlike the Pope or the Imams of Sunni Moslem countries--does not even control the purse strings. Each mosque is spiritually, financially and these days militarily independent.

This independence explains why the Shah--for all his money and secret agents--was never able to stop revolution bubbling upward from the Shi'ite mosques. The Shah could not cut off their money because they raised their money themselves. For every mullah the Shah arrested, another took his place. And when SAVAK did succeed in turning one Ayatollah or another to the Shah's cause, their spiritual authority vanished and their following faded away. Those same constraints continue to prevent Shi'ism from being

used as the instrument of one man's autocracy today.

What happens to an ordinary mullah--or even an Imam--when enough people decide his Akoundism has gone too far?

It is significant that of the 12 great Imams of the Shi'ite faith, every one of them died a violent death. The faithful remember these political-religious leaders as saints, too good for this world, who were martyred by the forces of heresy and unrighteousness. But to the secular student of politics, it is inconceivable that every one of these men should have suffered the identical fate, without having also alienated many of their own followers.

Asked if he thought Akoundism could undo the revolution, Mehdi Adib Azad, the 32-year-old manager of a Mashhad food processing plant, replied: "I don't see how. Either the mullahs will continue to be basically a constructive force. or..." He stopped, having decided to answer with a question.

"We had one revolution," Azad said. "Don't you think we can have another?" (Copyright Pacific News Service 1979)



Ayatollah Khomeini exercises from this small pilgrimage town 85 miles south of Tehran recently was illustrated in a very graphic way. In order to confer with the Ayatollah, the entire Iranian cabinet, including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, boarded a mini-bus in Tehran and subjected itself to the hot and tedious five-hour round trip from the capital to Qum.

Khomeini could have spared the cabinet this inconvenience with a 20-minute helicopter flight to Tehran. But Iran today, is a country where the mountains all go to Mohammad.

In fact, hardly a week passes without the Ayatollah and the Revolutionary Council issuing some sweeping order--ranging from nationalization of the banks to a dress code for the Caspian beach resorts--without consulting the government in Tehran, or even informing it in advance.

Does this mean the real capital of the country is Qum? To a large extent, many Iranian officials complain, it means Iran has no national government at all. Even what Khomeini orders, the government frequently lacks the power to implement. While many Iranians, after 30 years of harassment by an all-powerful central government, savor the widespread local autonomy that results, others, including those appointed to office by Khomeini himself, find the situation intolerable, and are doing what they can to combat it.

Both the danger of the Shah's absolutism being replaced by a religious one, and the checks working inside Iran against it, are summed up by a new word that has recently entered the Iranian political vocabulary, the world's latest "ism."

Called "Akoundism," it is the word Iranians use to refer to the misuse of authority by Shi'ite

variety of clerics have been shot dead--including several close to Khomeini himself.

Perhaps Iran's most controversial Ayatollah--according to many, the worst perpetrator of Akoundism--is Ayatollah Khalkhali, former head of the revolutionary courts. He has been dismissed from his post because of what even fervent Islamic revolutionaries call flagrant injustices. In his most criticized action yet, Khalkhali offered a bounty to anyone who would kill the Shah, and then fabricated the story that he had retained Carlos, the international terrorist, to do it. High Iranian officials were appalled, and quickly denied the report. But Khalkhali's own reputation may have suffered as much inside Iran as Iran's reputation suffered abroad as a result of the incident.

Recently a variety of Iranians around the country were asked if they considered Akoundism a serious danger. Some of their replies:

An unemployed youth in a Tehran low-income area--"in a few months things will improve, and we will rid ourselves of these Akounds, the way we got rid of those SAVAK goons."

The governor of a province--"Tens of thousands of Iranians did not sacrifice their lives for Akoundism. It must be controlled because if Islam fails it will be the communists who inherit Iran."

A young, affluent, westernized intellectual--"The Akounds are the new SAVAK."

For most Iranians, of course, Islam remains not a God that has failed, but one that has succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. They regard the mullahs not as threats to their freedom, but as agents of God who helped bring it about. But even Khomeini himself



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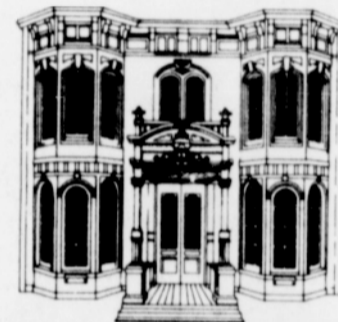
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