

## Patterns of Discontent:

### Will History Repeat in Iran?

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Mar 1, 2006

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

---



Articles & Testimony

**W**hile international attention is focused on Iran's nuclear program and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bombast, Iranian society itself is facing turbulent times. Increasingly, patterns are re-emerging that mirror events in the years before the Islamic revolution. These include political disillusionment, domestic protest, government failure to match public expectations of economic success, and labor unrest. Nevertheless, the Islamic regime has learned the lessons of the past and is determined not to repeat them, even as political discord crescendos. This essay is derived from the authors' recent book, [Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos](http://www.palgrave-usa.com/Search/SearchResults.aspx?searchby=searchby&Qk=eternal+iran&submit.x=0&submit.y=0&submit=submit) (<http://www.palgrave-usa.com/Search/SearchResults.aspx?searchby=searchby&Qk=eternal+iran&submit.x=0&submit.y=0&submit=submit>) (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in Iran's 2005 presidential elections shocked both Iranians and the West. "Winner in Iran calls for United, Reformists Reel," headlined the New York Times. Most Western governments assumed that former president and Expediency Council chairman Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would win. Many academics also were surprised. Few paid any heed to the former blacksmith's son who rose to become mayor of Tehran. Brown University anthropologist William O. Beeman, for example, spent the election campaign in Tehran. In a June 15, 2005 interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, he called Rafsanjani the frontrunner and said the clerical establishment backed Muhammad Baqur Qalibaf. He did not mention Ahmadinejad in his analysis, just two days before he won the first round. The Washington Post only mentioned Ahmadinejad once prior to the election. The New York Times did little better, with just brief four mentions dating to Ahmadinejad's 2003 election as mayor of Tehran.

The election of Ahmadinejad was only the latest in a series of surprises that Iran has produced in recent decades. Indeed, a review of Iran's history over the last thirty years suggests that Iran excels at surprising its own people and the world. This does not mean that history will be repeated. But it is worth bearing in mind that nearly three decades after the shah's grip on power began to falter, there are once again deep strains between governed and government. That suggests a looming struggle between regime and people which is already unfolding quietly. Given Iran's track record at changing direction suddenly and unexpectedly, it would be unwise to assume that the Ahmadinejad government will rule smoothly. While Washington and most European capitals focus their attention on diplomacy

surrounding Tehran's non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's safeguards agreement, internally, the Islamic Republic is bubbling.

### A Revolution That Shocked the World

The Islamic Revolution shook Iran to its foundations. Few observers, either inside or outside Iran, imagined a return to theocracy would be possible: In early 1978, Iran was striving to become like Europe; within a year, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was leading Iran down an entirely different path that rejected Western notions of modernity.

The revolution was a massive event in several senses. For one, it appears to have been the most popular revolution in history in the sense that at least ten percent of the Iranian population participated, compared to little more than one percent for the 1776 American, 1789 French, or 1918 Russian revolutions. Furthermore, it brought far-reaching changes to Iranian society, dramatically reversing the Western-style modernization which had been the central feature of Iranian life since the early years of Reza Shah's reign. And the Iranian revolution also reverberated throughout the region if not the world, stimulating destabilizing movements, catalyzing terrorism, and leading to one of the bloodiest wars of the post-World War II period.

Iran's revolution was a remarkable event in many ways. It took nearly all foreign observers by surprise; equally, it took nearly all Iranians by surprise. While some historians have, with 20-20 hindsight, argued that the Islamic Revolution was a logical outcome of Iran's political evolution, a sober analysis of what happened and why still leaves a dissatisfying sense that the causes remain not fully explained. Perhaps the best way to understand the 1979 Islamic Revolution is that it was indeed in part an anomaly.

That the opposition to the Shah rallied behind the banner of Islam was the revolution's greatest surprise to the West. What had passed largely unnoticed over the previous decade was the coming together of the same coalition of reform-minded intellectuals and clerics that had been so central to both the 1906-11 Constitutional Revolution and to Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq's success. . . .

Middle East Review of International Affairs

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)