

# Iran—Democratic Evolution or Revolution?

Feb 19, 2003



Brief Analysis

**F**or many years, Western democracies have been pessimistic about the possibility of Iran becoming a secular democracy. Thus, Western policy toward Iran has long been characterized by a series of hesitant, inconsistent, and ad hoc decisions aimed at countering Iranian-sponsored terrorism, coupled with a relative lack of concern about the tyrannical nature of the Iranian regime. This unfounded pessimism is predicated on a profound misreading of the Islamic Republic as a traditional religious government rather than a revolutionary regime.

## Khomeini's Revolutionary Ideology

The Islamic regime owes its character to two potent and eminently modern myths: the myth of "the people" and the myth of "the revolution." These myths helped the Islamic movement mobilize the Iranian population, including its secularist elements, under the banner of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The idea of "the people" had more to do with "correct belief" than with real human beings, with those failing to adhere to the regime's ideology becoming de facto "enemies of the people." In short, the Islamic Republic's ideology is similar to that of other, more prominent revolutionary totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. Ironically, although the Islamists identify the West with Satan, many of the concepts that govern their actions are rooted in Western thought.

Iran's leaders claim to have restored a pure Islamic order based on shari'a (Islamic law). In fact, the Islamic Republic is at odds with both Shi'i beliefs and Iran's own history and traditions. Khomeini abandoned traditionalism to opt for modern Islamic totalitarianism, and the regime he installed abolished the notion of the free individual, seeking to recreate man in accord with its own truth. This view represents a profound rejection of religion, diminishing God's transcendence. In essence, then, the Islamic regime is a revolutionary entity, not a religious one. This is why Ali Khamenei -- once president of the Islamic Republic, now its Supreme Leader -- has been able to laud, without contradiction, the achievements of the atheistic revolutionary regimes in China and North Korea. For example, Khamenei has said that what brings the Islamic regime close to North Korea's is their common revolutionary character and their anti-Americanism -- factors that have contributed to the long and sincere collaboration between the two countries.

Despite Khamenei's views, the Iranian people favor democracy, regarding it not as a foreign imposition but as the common heritage of humanity. The unanimous popular praise of modernity and democratic institutions based on human rights demonstrates the inaccuracy of any supposed dichotomy between Western democracy and Islamic democracy.

## Democratic Transition in Iran

If Iran is to make a democratic transition, it must break away from the ideological and practical structure of totalitarianism. Shapur Bakhtiar, whom the Shah made prime minister in the months before the 1979 revolution, offered the option of organizing political parties and forming trade unions. Bakhtiar told Khomeini that a legitimate leader should come to power through ballots, not through street demonstrations and rioting, but Khomeini preferred the revolutionary route over the democratic one.

Dariush Shayegan, one of Iran's most profound thinkers, has analyzed why the Iranian intelligentsia were uninterested in democracy in 1979. At the time, they profoundly rejected Westernization, even though this rejection was itself driven by Western ideas such as existentialism, antimodernism, and Marxist revolutionary ideology. Over the past twenty years, however, Iranians have become intensely aware of the importance of human rights and democracy. Secular democracy now seems inevitable, given the widespread rejection of revolutionary ideology and the diffusion of sentiment in favor of human rights. The only remaining questions are when and by what means Iranians will decide to close the book on the Islamic Republic.

Many in Iran look forward to a U.S. invasion of Iraq in the hopes that the United States will overthrow the Islamic Republic soon thereafter, completing the process begun with the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the United States will not use force against the regime in Tehran, nor should it. The democratization of Iran is up to the Iranian people themselves; they must take responsibility for their destiny.

#### The Impact of U.S. Policy on Iranian Democrats

The West cannot bring democracy to Iran. Yet, as modern secular democracies, both the United States and the European Union could and should challenge the Iranian regime on its totalitarian attitudes and ideologies. President George W. Bush has taken the right approach in criticizing the regime for its treatment of the Iranian people. In the months since Bush named Iran to the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, Tehran's rhetoric toward the United States has changed from an offensive to a defensive tone, with Iran's leaders attempting to prove that they are democratic and have the support of their people. Hence, U.S. government statements upbraiding the Islamic Republic for its lack of democracy and human rights are effective at shaming the regime.

Moreover, U.S. media attention to the plight of various Iranian dissidents offers the best protection for such individuals. Those whose cases become well known internationally are treated much better than those who do not share the spotlight. U.S. government statements about individual dissidents are particularly useful.

If Washington uses prodemocracy rhetoric merely to frighten Tehran into an agreement on foreign policy, the morale of the Iranian democracy movement will be severely affected. Some in Iran's reformist movement are well aware that they would lose all and be held accountable if the current regime collapsed. Hence, many in this camp would like to reach an agreement with the United States that largely preserves the status quo, and they may try to take advantage of a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to strengthen their argument that a foreign policy deal with Washington is appropriate.

Yet, Iranians -- particularly those who favor democracy -- are optimistic about the outcome of a possible war in Iraq. A more democratic regime in Baghdad would create positive shockwaves in Iran. If, however, a war resulted in another nondemocratic Iraqi regime, the fallout could be devastating for Iranian morale.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Nazgol Ashouri.

Policy #712

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