

16

Routinizing the Iranian Revolution

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Outline	352
Islamic Revolution of 1979	352
First: uncompromising independence and sovereignty	353
Second: the right to rebel against injustice, discrimination, and corruption	354
Third: a quest for freedom and the right to rebel against oppression, censorship, and coercion	355
Fourth: the call for the end of autocratic monarchy and secular dictatorship	355
Fifth: the demand for Islamic teachings in the public domain	356
Ayatollah Khomeini: spiritual architect of the Islamic Republic of Iran	356
Background of custodial rule of the jurist (<i>wilayat al-faqih</i>)	357
Hardliner domination	361
Ayatollah Khomeini: a complex revolutionary cleric	363
After Khomeini	364

Outline

- Revolution lays foundations of new Iranian state and Constitution.
- Charismatic leadership and Shi'i political theology gave birth to the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Constitutional values undermined by a context of political threats to Iran.
- Expedient secular values adopted by charismatic religious leadership erodes values of constitution and religion.

The dramatic developments in 1979 shook the world. Popular uprisings forced Iran's despotic monarch, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–80) into exile. He was replaced by a charismatic cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89). Khomeini touched down at Tehran's Mehrabad airport on February 4, 1979, back from his temporary exile in France. In the wake of the heady events of the Revolution he was instantly catapulted into the role of the leader of the Revolution much to the surprise of the other political players. Since that day, the Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to unfold into one of the most dramatic stories in modern religion and politics. What defines the Islamic Republic of Iran is the story of a charismatic figure who inserted a revolutionary Shi'i political theology into a modern nation-state (Enayat 2008). The current Iranian government has both withstood international efforts to undermine its revolutionary impact and also resisted internal dissent. Whether it will be able to withstand the new waves of discontent sweeping the Middle East remains a poignant political question (Keddie 1988).

Islamic Revolution of 1979

Continuous uprisings began in January 1978 in the city of Qom, seat of some of the most important institutions of learning in Iran where more than 100 seminary students and inhabitants were killed by the security forces. Forty days later, a protest in Tabriz, meant to memorialize the martyrs of Qom, turned into a bloody event as security force brutality triggered a nationwide chain of memorials. In what became known as Black Friday, security forces murdered hundreds of peaceful protesters in Tehran. By September 1978 the Pahlavi regime's days were numbered. The government officially transferred rule to the military, but the uprisings continued. Many soldiers and officers deserted their command in support of the protests. In the largest demonstration on 'Ashoura, commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, more than two million protesters took to the streets.

Mosques and other religious centers became the heart of the revolution. All people, regardless of religion, gender, language, or social status, participated in the demonstrations. But the Shi'i clergy had a distinguished role. In every village, town,

city, and region the presence of the clergy was unmistakable and the clerical fraternity functioned like a political party. Declarations and speeches made by Ayatollah Khomeini circulated through the underground (Algar 1981). Khomeini had challenged the monarchy 15 years earlier, and spent time and gained popularity during his exile in Turkey, Iraq and France.

Although some revolutionary writers, students and militant groups were secular and even communists, the great majority of participants in the Revolution were folk with some form of religious convictions. No one could compete with Ayatollah Khomeini in stature and influence. The people trusted him and his plan for the future of their country. Most of the senior Ayatollahs in Qom supported him. Khomeini's leadership was based on a consensus among oppositional parties. High school and university students, women, laborers, teachers, businessmen, and clergy all followed him.

The protests were expressed in the form of demands announced through slogans, placards, sayings, and underground pamphleteering and information distribution networks. The demands of the protestors are important for several reasons. They formed the core demands of the Revolution and continue to inform Iran's national identity. To grasp these demands is to also understand the revolutionary generation of Iran and the country's conduct both domestically and on the national stage.

First: uncompromising independence and sovereignty

Public opinion held that Iran should be managed by a national plan, based on protecting its public interests. Income generated by the oil industry should be channeled into the country's national treasury in order to improve the lives of its citizens. The monarch, government, and army commanders should put the interests of Iran ahead of the interests of international powers and oil companies. In privileging the interests of foreign companies, Iranians believed that the monarch and his supporters were violating the sovereignty of Iran in plundering the resources for their personal gain.

The real ruler of the country, they charged, was the American Ambassador in Tehran, not the Shah. Iran's most important allies were the United States and Israel. After a CIA coup against liberal prime minister Muhammad Musaddiq in 1953, who nationalized the Iranian oil industry, US foreign policy emasculated Iran's priorities via the monarch Muhammad Reza Shah. The Shah oppressed all national movements in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf, as a US proxy. Iranians hated the Shah because of his absolute obedience to US foreign policy and unconditional support for Israel irrespective of Israeli policies towards Palestinians.

The revolution was not only against imperialism; it was also staunchly anti-communist. The Soviet Union and China, like the US, were not ideal exemplars for Iran.

As the Soviet Union was Iran's northern neighbor, Iranians had a unique view of the political events in that country. Iranians were strongly disappointed by communist policy. The Iranian Communist Party (*Tudeh*) became known as the foreign policy wing of another superpower. A major slogan of the revolution was "No to the East (Soviet Union, China, and communism), no to the West (US, Europe, capitalism and imperialism)."

Diverse Iranian groups supported national sovereignty. Religious groups grounded their critique in Qur'anic principles. The religious authority denounced dependence on foreign powers as a sign of illegitimacy. Leftist intellectuals and socialists also called for an independent Iran. Many communists maintained loyalty to the Soviet Union but joined in denouncing imperialism and the US. The national businessmen and the trader markets, called the *bazar*, supported it too (Ashraf 1988); their aim was to establish a national economy based on the interest and investment of Iranians. Ayatollah Khomeini banged loudly on the drum of independence. First and foremost, the Revolution of 1979 was an expression of the quest for independence (Rajaei 2007).

Second: the right to rebel against injustice, discrimination, and corruption

Social justice was also a powerful demand of the Revolution. Due to skyrocketing oil prices in the 1970s, huge amounts of money flowed into the country. But the Pahlavi administration did nothing to distribute this wealth. A large part of the money was wired directly to the royal family's personal accounts in Western banks. National money was also used to line the pockets of loyalists, who Iranians dubbed the "thousand families." These families, along with the royal family, held a monopoly on the import of Western goods.

The poor became poorer and the rich became richer. Pressure was mounting on the lower classes. The average income in Iran increased in the 1970s, but the gap between the rich minority and the majority was gaping. Middle- and lower-class citizens made up the majority of the opposition. Their demands were for social justice and ending discrimination.²

Injustice was also manifest in the judiciary. Corrupt judges never failed to side with a party that boasted connections to power. If the case was political, the scales were even more weighted in favor of the rulers.

Religious authorities, leftists, and elites sounded the call for reform. The masses felt these injustices in their skin and bones. Ayatollah Khomeini called the Shah an "unjust ruler." Religiously, these words alone could strip his administration of its legitimacy. Demands for equity and justice rang through Iran. The Revolution of 1979 was the voice of justice. It was an egalitarian revolution.

Third: a quest for freedom and the right to rebel against oppression, censorship, and coercion

In the 1970s and throughout the Pahlavi period, Iran was a closed society. Criticizing the king and his office was tantamount to apostasy. The government choked out any independent media that might have provided space for free expression. Opposition parties were prohibited. Prisons were filled with political activists. Any mention of human rights in the constitution was seemingly erased. Human rights were violated. Political prisoners were tortured. Books, films, theaters, and all cultural product were placed under harsh censorship. Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 as US President and his emphasis on human rights allowed the international media to highlight the crisis of human rights violations in Iran as well as other countries.

The elites led the call for freedom and liberty. The religious authority supported them, buttressing these demands with Qur'anic exegesis and by proffering examples of governance furnished by the Prophet Muhammad and Imam 'Ali. Writers, intellectuals, academicians, teachers, students, journalists, artists, and political activists threw in their support. Political freedom was one of the major goals of the revolution.

Fourth: the call for the end of autocratic monarchy and secular dictatorship

Iran had a long history of civilization. But this was a history supported by kingdom, autocracy, and monarchy. The Pahlavis made crucial adjustments to this historic model.

Both of the Pahlavis came to power thanks to foreign support. Reza Shah (1878-1944) was propped up by Britain in 1925, as was his son, before the US also came to his aid (1941 and 1953). In all of Iranian history, Muhammad Ali Shah Qajar (1872-1925) had been the only previous Iranian ruler to accept aid from foreign powers (1907-9). He was in the service of Russia.

The Pahlavis were also unique in their stance against religion. As radical secularists they tried to expunge Islam from the public sphere. They drew a tight line around Shi'i seminaries and Shi'i authorities and gave short shrift to religious teachings. The Pahlavis' "modernization" was closely linked to Westernization. The monarch's program of Westernization led to severe restriction on Islam as a public faith while expanding Western forms of life in Iran.

This secularizing project elicited a particularly strong reaction from religious people and Shi'i authorities. They identified the Shah as the enemy of Islam. But religious and secular citizens alike agreed that his government spouted a pack of lies. "Death to Shah" was another major slogan on the lips of the revolutionaries.

Ayatollah Khomeini demanded that the Shah step down. He sought to end Iran's long-dominant method of governance, 25 centuries of monarchical rule. Iranian

welcomed this goal. Their demands would be met in 1979, which marked the last year of monarchical rule in Iran. But did dictatorship die with the official death of the monarchy? That is the questions that many Iranians ask today.

Fifth: the demand for Islamic teachings in the public domain

More than 98 percent of Iranians are Muslims and more than 90 percent of them are Shi'i. Clearly, most citizens felt strongly about their religious practice. Following Muslim tradition meant that Friday should be an official holiday and the Hijri calendar should organize the country's official year. Restrictions on religious affairs in the public sphere ran contrary to these social facts and attested to the secular leaders' strong-arm tactics. But, as would become clear, Muslim civil society in the 1970s was strong.

The majority of protesters called for the respect of Islamic norms, creed, and faith. They pursued the protection of Islamic ethics and rituals as enshrined in Islamic rules (*Shari'a*). There were two approaches to *Shari'a*: traditional/conservative and reformist/modern. But, being as there was no experience in implementing *Shari'a* during that time, the protesters did not make this distinction. Their call was simply one of respect for Islamic teachings.

While the secular and non-practicing minority did not support this pursuit, they apparently did not reject its demands. The Revolution was called "Islamic" for many reasons: first, the call for the implementation of Islamic norms was among the major demands of the Revolution; second, the Shi'i authority was the revolutionary vanguard; third, mosques and religious institutions were organizational conduits for revolutionaries; fourth, the clergy had a distinguished role in the Revolution.

Ayatollah Khomeini: spiritual architect of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Ayatollah Khomeini's most dramatic intervention was to link the doctrine of the "guardianship of the jurist" (*wilayat al-faqih*) with modern Islamic political thought. Khomeini's political ideas evolved over time during his exile in Iraq and France. He developed them systematically, drawing on older precedents in Shi'i political thought; they stemmed from a reconstruction and critique of several doctrines.

First, Khomeini constructed the idea of an Islamic revolution from the Islamic teaching that every believer was obliged to "command the good and to prohibit the evil." In his view, of all the evils in the world, oppression by an unjust ruler was the worst. Khomeini held that the optimum and lawful manner of "commanding the good" was to form an Islamic government.

Second, he argued, the learned in religion, those who were expert in ethical and moral teachings—known as the *faqih* (pl. *fuqaha*) translated as "jurists" in modern parlance—had a special responsibility and duty in Islam. Theirs was a special calling.

In his view, it was the unqualified duty of Muslim jurists, the *fuqaha* and *ulama*, to do everything in their power to prosecute political evil and injustice as the repositories of moral conscience in Islam. More pragmatic religious scholars believed it was not an unqualified duty to resist political injustice. One should resist evil only when there was a high probability that an intervention would successfully make a difference. (Khomeini 1961: 472–83) Khomeini disagreed with this view. He was critical of those Iranian clerics who adopted political quietism. Such self-serving pragmatism, he argued, was in defiance of the commandments of the Qur'an and the prophetic teachings that taught the need to resist and revolt against evil.

The commandment to do good in Islam, he argued, was first and foremost addressed to the *faqih*, the jurist. It is the just jurist who is addressed by God, the supreme legislator. In turn, the lay people or ordinary believers are urged to support the leadership of the just jurist in all ethical and moral matters. In fact, Khomeini made the explicit argument that the just jurist possessed the same custodial powers in moral and ethical matters as did the Prophet Muhammad and the Shi'i Imams (Khomeini 1971: 461, 472). He made his case stronger by citing authority. According to some teachings of the sixth Shi'i Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, and other custodial religious leaders (imams), he said, the jurists are the successors of the Imam.³ As such, they are the designated rulers of the community. Therefore, in Khomeini's view, *Shari'a* or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), provided a template for expanding justice in society.

Background of custodial rule of the jurist (wilayat al-faqih)

The doctrine of the custodial role of the jurist goes back to the early nineteenth century of Qajar rule in Iran. The weak Qajar monarchs were pitted against powerful religious authorities. In order for the Qajar monarchs to wage war, jihad, against external enemies they needed the religious validation of their actions from the Shi'i religious authorities. It was in that context that a prominent Shi'i scholar and jurist, Mulla Ahmad Naraqi (d. 1829) stated for the first time that jurists have a custodial role or moral guardianship not only in religious affairs, but also in temporal political affairs. In other words, according to this view, the jurists were the disguised sovereigns of both the religious and secular realms. Naraqi's claim did not go unchallenged. His distinguished student, Shaikh Murtada Ansari (1781–1864) challenged his teacher for expanding the power of the jurists in this manner.

This very idea played out somewhat differently in the early twentieth century when Iranians experimented with constitutional government. Shi'ite clerics were

divided about the legitimacy of constitutional government. The majority of the Shi'i authorities at the learning centers in Najaf in Iraq and those in Tehran, Tabriz, and other cities supported the idea of constitutionalism. They found juristic and theological arguments to restrict the monarchy and appealed to justice. In doing so they validated the rule of law, equality of all citizens before the law, freedom of the citizens, and the responsibility and the accountability of the ruler. The most significant point they made was that the power of the ruler was limited in religious terms.

Among the most distinguished authorities who supported this division of powers and limitation of the right of secular rulers were Akhund Mulla Muhammad Kazim Khorasani (1839–1911) and Mirza Husain Na'ini (1850–1936) (Ha'eri 1977). Khorasani was the spiritual leader of the movement (Kadivar 2005); Na'ini wrote the most important theoretical book on governance in Islam (Na'ini 2010). They began the process of reconciling Islam and the modern state. Khorasani made one significant point that would later resonate in twentieth-century Iran: the religious jurists do not have powers of guardianship and custodial authority. The administration of the country should devolve to Parliament.

But during the constitutional movement there were also hardline clerics who opposed the separation of secular and religious powers. In some way they channeled the views of Naraqi and opposed the restriction of political power. So therefore they opposed the idea of constitutional rule, arguing that it was antithetical to Islam and Shi'i thought. But effectively they were monarchists who gave absolute power and authority to the monarch. Foremost among them was the famous jurist Sheikh Fadlullah Nouri (d. 1909). He believed that freedom, equality, and civil law all were antithetical to Islam and he despised any attempt to restrict the power of the ruler.

Khomeini's ideas evolved amid these complicated debates among the Shi'i clergy (Enayat 1983). In his early writings he supported constitutional rule, the form favored by Na'ini (Khomeini 1943: 222). Prior to 1978 he used the term "Islamic governance" when describing the future for Iran that he envisioned. Then in October 1978 he first used the phrase "Islamic Republic" when he was in Paris. What did he mean by these two terms? Was this a new vision or was it merely a reflection of an older and broader Shi'i sentiment?

A few months before victory of Islamic Revolution, Khomeini began promoting his ideas for Iran's future. Iran would be an "Islamic Republic," he said, acknowledging that the government should represent its citizens. The people, he said, must directly elect the president of Iran. On the other hand, the clergy or jurists like himself would not hold governmental positions. Their role should be purely and transparently advisory. At the time he did not mention the theory of "guardianship of the jurist" (*wilayat al-faqih*) in any of his Paris speeches or writings. He appealed to freedom of expression for all political players and opposition parties, including Marxists. But Parliament, he said, should apply Shari'a and take serious the views of the Muslim jurists (Kadivar 1999: 160–203).

In his first speech made after his return to Iran, Khomeini expressed the right of each generation to choose its own destiny. He appointed Mehdi Bazargan (1907–95) as the prime minister of the revolutionary regime. Bazargan was a liberal Muslim, an intellectual, and the leader of the Freedom Movement Party (Chehabi 1985). Bazargan had three assignments: to hold a referendum in favor of regime change; to prepare a draft constitution; and to elect an assembly of experts (*majlis-e mu'assasan*) to design the final constitution.

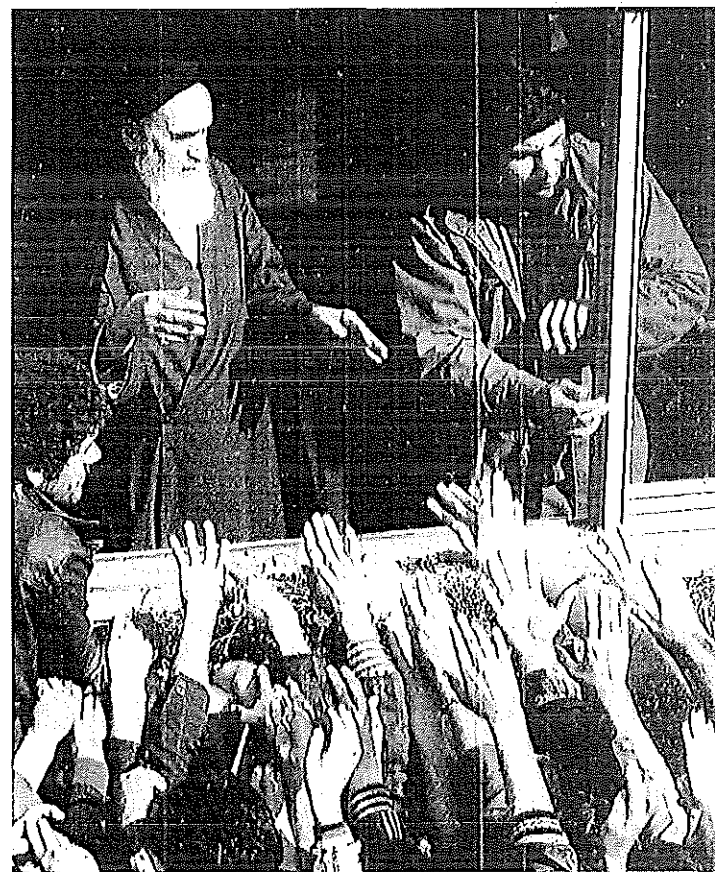


Figure 16.1 Ayatollah Khomeini is greeted by his supporters during his return to Iran after 15 years in exile (Tehran, 1979). Courtesy of Gabriel Duval/AFP/Getty Images.

While Ayatollah Khomeini called the new regime the "Islamic Republic of Iran", Bazargan preferred the name of "Islamic Democratic Republic of Iran." The Leader of the Revolution argued that Islam is perfect in itself and therefore the term "democratic" was unnecessary. When Bazargan held the referendum in favor of the Islamic Republic, yes or no, there were several objections. Some secular intellectuals criticized the idea for three reasons. First, they said, the phrase "Islamic Republic" is ambiguous. Second, the role of *Shari'a*, the jurists and their role in determining what were the national interests were all unclear. Third, they proposed that other models of governance, such as "republic" and "democratic republic," be put in the referendum alongside the choice of an "Islamic republic."⁴

In April 1979, 98.2 percent of the voters affirmed the idea of an "Islamic Republic." The Bazargan cabinet published the first draft of the constitution of the Islamic Republic in June 1979. This draft bore many resemblances to both Western European countries' constitutions and Iran's constitution of 1905. The president of the Islamic Republic was to be the commander in wartime, the leader in peacetime, and the highest official in the country at all times. This constitution did not make any provisions for *wilayat al-faqih* or for the special rights of the clergy. For the most part, the Shi'i authorities approved the draft. Neither did the Ayatollah Khomeini decry the absence of *wilayat al-faqih*.

Iranians selected the assembly of experts for the final review of the constitution. The assembly was largely composed of the clergy. It made deep revisions to the draft constitution or rewrote it. The most significant addition was the clause instituting the guardianship of the jurist, *wilayat al-faqih*. The final constitutional draft gave to the guardian jurist (*wali-e faqih*) the three powers that were given to the president, namely commander in wartime, leader in peacetime, and the highest official in the country. In addition, the guardian jurist had the power to appoint all key figures to the government, including the judiciary, army, and the guardianship council. The appointed guardian jurists had the right to veto parliamentary rules, disqualify candidates in all elections, and were vested with the exclusive right to interpret the constitution. The guardianship council was the most powerful institution in this constitution. It was a complete coup conducted by the authors of the final constitution.

Only eight members of Iran's assembly of experts objected to the article providing for *wilayat al-faqih*. Among them were Izatullah Sahabi (1930–2011), a member of the revolutionary committee, Ali Golzadeh Ghafuri (1923–2009), an open-minded clergyman, and Abul-Hasan Bani-Sadr (b. 1933), a liberal Muslim who would later become the first president of the Islamic Republic. The distinguished leader of Friday prayer in Tehran, Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmoud Taleqani (1911–79) who passed away one month before this event, voiced his disagreement to a special committee of the assembly of experts.

The most influential opposition to the guardianship of the jurist, *wilayat al-faqih*, and the constitution was expressed by Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Kazem Shariatmadari (1905–86), the main rival of Ayatollah Khomeini for more than 50 years. Shariatmadari voiced his opposition to the guardianship of the jurist *wilayat al-faqih* in a declaration that was not broadcast by government radio and television. He believed that articles 5 and 110 of the constitution were in violation of national sovereignty that is the basis of the constitution. Shariatmadari called for a boycott of the vote to ratify the constitution. His followers in Tabriz took to rioting and took over the city for several days and protested against the new constitution and the central government (Chehabi 1991).

Secular opposition to the new regime said that *wilayat al-faqih* was tantamount to dictatorship. The turban worn by the clerics had simply replaced the crown of the deposed Shah (Amir Arjomand 1989). Ayatollah Khomeini broke his silence on this matter and welcomed the guardianship of the jurist as a divine gift. He called *wilayat al-faqih* the guarantee of Islam and the protector of the country. Governance of the jurist, *wilayat al-faqih* was the very opposite of dictatorship, he claimed.

Iranians ratified the constitution in the referendum of December 1979. Only 75 percent of participants that took part in the first referendum came out for the second. In November 1979 student followers of Imam Khomeini occupied the US Embassy in Tehran. The occupiers took the US staff as hostages. Bazargan and his ministers resigned in objection to this event after nine months. The prime minister was accused of being too shallow and non-revolutionary, and Ayatollah Khomeini became the leader of an energetic revolution. The time of hardliners had begun.

Hardliner domination

Several factors led to the rise of the hardliners. First, anti-clerical terrorist groups assassinated several religious figures and army commanders in the early aftermath of the revolution. Second, militant organizations, such as the People's Mujahedin (Abrahamian 1989), a Muslim-Marxist organization, and the Marxist People's Party made demands to share governance. Third, border provinces largely made up of ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Baluchs, Turkamans, Arabs, and Azaris tried to secede from the central state. Militant Marxist groups with foreign help supported these secessionist demands. Fourth, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Army attacked Iran in October 1980. Fifth, the US and European countries supported all internal and external opposition movements. Sixth, the violated interpretation of *Shari'a* of some of the revolutionary forces including the office of Ayatollah Khomeini himself (Moin 2005) also contributed.

The new Islamic regime quickly sent shockwaves through the Middle East region. Revolutionary slogans announced the desire to see revolution worldwide, a universal jihad against monarchy and dictatorship, the destruction of Israel, international unity

against imperialism and capitalism, and the dawn of a new Muslim awakening. When the US announced that it was to end ties with Iran, Khomeini welcomed the news.

From the early days of the Islamic Republic the courts and judicial authorities eagerly enforced the regime's injustice. Many of the previous regime's agents and army commanders, including the last prime minister, were put to death after summary show trials. Such cynical and speedy justice could at first be ascribed to early revolutionary fervor. But over time it became the norm. The government established a special "revolutionary court" where all political and security cases, including cases involving the press, were referred. While the constitution mandated an open trial by jury and the right of the defendant to choose a lawyer all cases were heard behind closed doors and without the advocacy of independent lawyers.

Political prisoners, especially militants and separatists, were tortured despite the practice being constitutionally outlawed. The death penalty was meted out frequently and without due process to adversaries of the regime (Abrahamian 1999). Most of the revolutionary court judges did not attend law school. They generally studied *fiqh* in the seminaries of Qom and other cities for a few years, not enough time required to attain the qualified status as an independent jurist (*mujtahid*).

Vocal criticism of the revolutionary courts and the implementation of *Shari'a* instead of penal codes increased, including the opposition of Bazargan. One political party, the National Front, called the use of Islamic penal codes as "medieval." Ayatollah Khomeini responded harshly, denouncing members of the National Front as apostates. To criticize the use of *Shari'a* in his view was tantamount to attacking Islam. Many grand Ayatollahs too denounced the revolutionary courts for not complying with their standards of *Shari'a*.

The war with Iraq and internal civil skirmishes were used to muzzle the media despite the fact that Iranians, including Ayatollah Khomeini himself, had made freedom of expression one of their loudest revolutionary rallying cries. Khomeini accused critical media of receiving support from the West. Revolutionary elements took over the offices of some non-governmental newspapers. The public prosecutor of the revolutionary court banned all non-governmental media. Radio and TV production was placed under the office of the leader.

Political parties were also restricted, Marxist parties were banned immediately. Most of them were pro-Soviet, pro-China, militant or separatists. In the second round of restrictions, the People's Mujahedin, the National Front and Ayatollah Shariatmadari's Azari Party were outlawed. Finally, the Freedom Movement was banned. The Islamic Republic Party held a monopoly on politics. Five grand Ayatollahs were placed under house arrest or restriction in the 1980s.⁵ Most of them criticized Khomeini for not having thoroughly implemented *Shari'a*.

Two months after the Revolution, the assassination of government officials began. The first trigger was pulled on Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari (1920-79), one of the

most distinguished students of Khomeini. The People's Mujahedin managed the second round of terror. An office of the Islamic Republic Party was bombed, which killed more than 70 party members, Ayatollah Dr. Muhammad Beheshti (1928-81), the head of judiciary, among them. Two months later, the same wave of terror killed President Raja'i (1933-81) and Prime Minister Bahonar (1933-81). These acts only furthered the restrictions on domestic freedoms. The government began censoring books, films, theater and music. The first president, Abul-Hassan Bani-Sadr, fled to Paris less than two years after he took office.

The clergy-run government could not endure pluralism and diversity. The constitution only guaranteed clergymen roles in leadership and the guardianship council. After a few years clergy dominated parliament, the judiciary, the ministry of security, the army office of security and the revolutionary guard. The Islamic Republic became a Republic of the Clerics.

Ayatollah Khomeini: a complex revolutionary cleric

Ayatollah Khomeini was one of the more progressive grand Ayatollahs. His religious interpretations removed bans on music, on women artists on television and in cinema, on the right of women to work outside of the house. His views on the chador were comparatively liberal in that he ruled that if a woman covered her hair and body it sufficed as religious dress. A wife could initiate divorce from her husband if she stipulated this in her marriage contract. Husbands needed the permission of their wives if they wished to enter a polygamous marriage. He advocated women's suffrage. He removed restrictions on playing chess if it did not involve gambling. And he permitted sex-change surgery.

He was the first Shi'i jurist who acknowledged the concept of the modern state in his jurisprudence. He thought that *Shari'a* was the best source of governance in the political, social, financial, cultural, and military spheres. Later he increasingly found the historical interpretations of the *Shari'a* incompatible with the modern state. Thus he increasingly relied on the rule of necessity and argued that what was expedient and in the public interest should take precedence over religious rules.

This trend marked a turning point in more than 12 centuries of Shi'i jurisprudence. It marked the secularization of Shi'i *fiqh* (Matsuanga 2009). He established a new organization called the Expediency Council. This council was placed above the guardianship council, the main representative of *Shari'a*. This new hierarchy put "regime expedience" above the *Shari'a*-oriented guardianship council that oversaw parliament. Ayatollah Khomeini might not have been familiar with the work of Thomas Hobbes, but if we were to replace the absolute power of the state with the power of the "guardian jurist" formulated by Khomeini there would be striking resemblances.

After a UN-brokered ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, the militant People's Mujahedin attacked Iran with the support of the Iraqi Air Force. Even though the Revolutionary Guards finally defeated them, thousands of Iranians were killed. In this atmosphere, Khomeini issued an order to question each Mujahedin prisoner as well as other political prisoners, even if he or she was not in the battlefield, to either denounce the group or face the death penalty. Almost 3,000 prisoners in Tehran, many of who had only been sentenced to a few years in jail, were put to death. The event remains one of the blackest moments on the record of the Islamic Republic.

Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009), identified as Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, opposed the execution of the regime's opposition (Akhavi 2008). Taking the life of one innocent human being was the same as murdering all of humanity, Montazeri wrote in a critical letter to Khomeini. Ayatollah Montazeri resigned as Khomeini's deputy less than three months before Khomeini's death. Ayatollah Khomeini wrote to Montazeri that leadership was more complicated than Montazeri's simple temperament could bear and stripped him of his title.

Khomeini was neither reformist nor fundamentalist, neither liberal nor a monarchist, neither open-minded nor a hardliner. He was a unique figure. He was Khomeini. He established a new style of politics in the Middle East and in the world. He increased the self-confidence of citizens, showed independence in promoting the authority of Islam and disregarding the superpowers of both capitalism and communism. He decried Zionism and promoted the compatibility of Islam with progress and development. He believed in Islamic theocracy as the required condition of implementation of *Shari'a* and saw secularism, democracy and human rights as the political tools of the Western enemy to attack the Islamic world.

Although he established the Islamic Republic with *Shari'a* he soon accepted secularization by increasing the role of the notion of public interest or regime expediency. In that sense Khomeini's experiment is a learning moment for all those who wish to pursue *Shari'a*-based politics.

After Khomeini

Ali Khamenei has followed in Khomeini's footsteps but lacks his charisma, stature, and credibility (Ashraf 1990; Amir-Arjomand 2009). Khamenei has maintained the trajectories of industrial modernization, health planning, and social welfare. He has increased educational and work opportunities for women as well as enhanced national literacy rates. Yet accountability, the rule of law, democracy, freedom, human rights, transparency, and justice have all suffered under his watch. Most of Khomeini's supporters now oppose Khamenei.

Khamenei's most vocal opponent was Ayatollah Montazeri. The latter was both an advocate of the guardianship of the jurist (*wilayat al-faqih*) and wrote a seminal book on



Figure 16.2 Billboards with Ayatollah Khamenei (current spiritual leader of Iran) and Ayatollah Khomeini (previous leader and force behind the 1979 Revolution). © dbimages/Alamy.

the topic. Yet he later revised his earlier views and criticized the absolute authority of the guardianship of the clerics (Kadivar 2011). Citizens should elect the president and jurists do not have any guardianship or religious authority on the executive power. Montazeri believed in governance with the consent of the citizenry and was a mortal opponent of authoritarian rule. His final statement, made a few months prior to his death in 2009 was, "This regime is neither Islamic nor a Republic" (Sadri and Sadri 2010).

Key figures once involved in government have joined the opposition. All of the former presidents, Abul-Hasan Bani-Sadr, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (b. 1934), and Muhammad Khatami (b. 1943), the former foreign policy minister Ebrahim Yazdi (b. 1931), the former prime minister Mir-Hussein Mousavi (b. 1942), and the former parliament spokesman Mahdi Karroubi (b. 1937) all are vocal opponents of the regime of leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad (b. 1956). Mousavi and Karroubi have been under house arrest since February 2011.

Today, the Islamic Republic is in the grip of a power triangle: the office of the guardian jurist, commanders of revolutionary guards, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his team. Dictatorship, corruption and misadministration dominate policy. Most Shi'i authorities do not support Khamenei. Among the grand Ayatollahs,

supporters of the regime are a small minority. But, while some Shi'i authorities have openly criticized the regime, most are quiet. The opposition believes that they are a majority. The Green Movement, begun in the aftermath of fraudulent presidential elections in 2009, is taking a strong stand in favor of democracy. Another generation of Iranians now weaned off the Islamic Republic is taking to the streets. On their lips are calls for a secular democratic state and a compassionate form of Islam.

Summary

- Diverse protesters united around a set of core demands during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. These demands included:
 - A call for uncompromising independence and sovereignty;
 - The right to rebel against injustice, discrimination, and corruption;
 - End to censorship and coercion under the Shah's autocratic monarchy;
 - Islamic teachings in the public domain.
- The charismatic figure Ayatollah Khomeini took root and inserted a revolutionary Shi'i political theology into the nation-state of Iran.
- Iran has been branded as an "Islamic Republic" since then.
- After the Revolution factions began to appear. A group of clergy monopolized all rights and inscribed their power and authority into the Constitution. Other clergymen and secularists protested. Amid this tumult, the religious hardliners gained the edge.
- In contemporary Iran, a new generation is calling for a secular democratic state and a compassionate form of Islam.

Discussion points

- What were the core demands of the Islamic revolution of 1979?
- What were the main characteristics of Khomeini?
- Did Iran request a theocratic regime or guardianship of the jurist in their revolution? Which factors made the Islamic Republic as it is?
- What factors dominated hardliners in Islamic Republic? What is the role of the US?
- What would be the demand of revolution (in 1979) if Iran had had the experience of three decades of Islamic Republic?

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Notes

- 1 I wish to thank Sam Kigar and the editors of this volume for editorial suggestions and comments.
- 2 Ali-Asghar Haj-Sayyed-Javadi, a secular writer, wrote two open analectic critical letters in fall 1978 on this issue that were published largely underground.
- 3 The majority of Shi'i jurists believe that this hadith is about judiciary not ruling.
- 4 Mustafa Rahimi, a secular writer, published his famous open letter to Ayatollah Khomeini in daily *Ayandigan* in December 31, 1978: "Why do I disagree with the Islamic Republic?"
- 5 Sayyed Kazem Shari'atmadari (1906-86), Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Rohani (1920-97), Sayyed Muhammad Hussein Shirazi (1928-2001), Sayyed Hasan Tabataba'i Qomi (1911-2007) and Sayyed Muhammad Sadiq Hussein Rohani (b. 1926).

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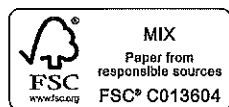
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C ontents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

Introduction – Jeffrey T. Kenney and Ebrahim Moosa	1
---	----------

Part I: Traditions and transformations	11
---	-----------

1. Scripture in the modern Muslim world: the Quran and Hadith – Jonathan Brown	13
2. Ethical landscape: laws, norms, and morality – Ebrahim Moosa	35
3. Governance and government – Robert D. Lee	57
4. From Isfahan to the internet: Islamic theology in the global village – Anthony R. Byrd and Richard C. Martin	79
5. Piety and devotion – Carl W. Ernst	107
6. The multiple faces of Islamic education in a secular age – Malika Zeghal	125

Part II: Themes and trends	149
-----------------------------------	------------

7. Women and gender in the Muslim world – Valentine M. Moghadam and Namrata Mitra	151
8. #Islam, social networking and the cloud – Gary R. Bunt	177
9. Islam: unbound and global – Bruce B. Lawrence	209
10. Militant movements – William Shepard	231
11. Secularization and the search for an authentic Muslim modern – Jeffrey T. Kenney	255
12. Islam and popular culture – Mark Sedgwick	279

Part III: Case studies of tradition and change	299
13. The emergence of media preachers: Yusuf al-Qaradawi – Marcia Hermansen	301
14. Assertive secularism, Islam and democracy in Turkey – Ahmet T. Kuru	319
15. The new Muslim Europe – Jørgen S. Nielsen	335
16. Routinizing the Iranian Revolution – Mohsen Kadivar	351
17. Muslim advocacy in America – Kathleen M. Moore	369
18. Women and Islamic law in Bangladesh: finding a space for the fatwa – Tiffany A. Hodge	389
19. Far from Mecca: modern Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia – Muhamad Ali	405
20. Politics and Islamization in African public spheres – Abdulkader Tayob	425
Appendix: maps and tables	445
<i>Index</i>	451

I Illustrations

Figures

- 1.1 Muslim pilgrims visiting Muhammad's tomb in Medina follow the tradition of saying "Peace be upon you" to him.
Courtesy of Jonathan Brown.
- 1.2 Quranic verse used in state public art in Tehran commemorating those who died in the Iran-Iraq War. It states that the martyrs remain alive with their Lord.
Courtesy of Jonathan Brown.
- 2.1 Islamic banking in Malaysia, 2010.
Courtesy of Bloomberg/Getty Images.
- 3.1 A common Arabic inscription on a wall in rural Morocco: God, King, Country. Found throughout the country, it symbolizes the links between rulership, people and God.
Courtesy of Lauren Kenney.
- 3.2 Ayatollah Khomeini.
Courtesy of iStockphoto.
- 4.1 Tariq Ramadan.
Courtesy of AFP/Getty Images.
- 5.1 Set of whirling dervishes and other ceramic products on sale at a roadside souvenir stall at Istiklal Caddesi in Istanbul, Turkey.
Courtesy of iStockphoto.

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