

1979: Iranians Debate Their Future

In the summer of 1978 the shah's government imposed a new economic policy. Intended to help the Iranian economy, it only added to the shah's unpopularity. The new policy froze wages and led to a sharp increase in unemployment. As a consequence, more and more working-class Iranians joined the protests, which were still interspersed with forty-day cycles of mourning. The protests had moved beyond demanding the restoration of the constitution to demanding the death of the shah. In response, the shah banned demonstrations and imposed martial law. Nevertheless, protests continued.

On September 8, 1978 soldiers put down a massive protest in Tehran with tanks and helicopters. Hundreds of Iranians died on a day that would become known as Black Friday. Protests spread to include strikes throughout Iran, including in the oil industry. The largest protests were held during the traditional period of mourning for Iman Hossein. In early December, on the days that marked the martyrdom of Iman Hossein, more than two million people took to the streets of Tehran.

Many soldiers, especially those who had been drafted into the army, refused to fire on unarmed demonstrators. Some joined the protests against the shah. Without the full backing of the military, the shah's hold on power disintegrated. A politically moderate prime minister, Shapour Bahktiar, negotiated a departure for the shah. On January 16 1979, the shah boarded a plane to leave on "an extended vacation." The streets of Iran's cities were filled with people who sang, danced, and hugged each other in celebration of the shah's departure.

“The shah has fled, SAVAK is fatherless.”

—Slogan shouted by Iranian demonstrators

After the departure of the shah, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that he would return from exile. He arrived in Iran on February 1,

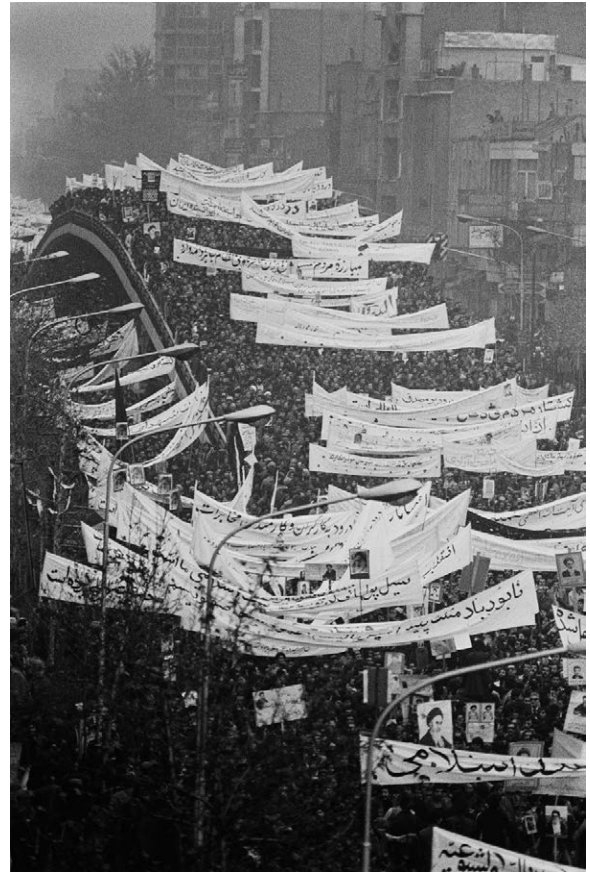


Image by Patrick Chauvel. © Sygma/Corbis. Used with permission.

December 11, 1978. Millions of Iranians marched to protest the shah.

1979. Millions lined the streets to greet him. Because the shah's security forces had eliminated most of the leaders of political resistance over the years, most Iranians saw Khomeini as the leader who had ended the tyranny of the shah.

Prime Minister Bahktiar's hold on power was shaky. Many Iranians saw Bahktiar as a puppet of the United States and a traitor because the shah had appointed him prime minister. Bahktiar vowed to review foreign contracts, to eliminate SAVAK, and to cut back on military expenditures. He also decided to declare martial law. Nevertheless, violence continued.

On the day that he returned, Khomeini declared that he had appointed a man named Mehdi Bazargan as the actual prime minister.

After a tense ten-day standoff and additional violence, Bahktiar resigned and Prime Minister Bazargan formed a coalition government.

In March 1979, a referendum was held. Khomeini worked behind the scenes to engineer the wording of the referendum: Iranians could only vote for or against forming an Islamic republic. Khomeini did not have the support of all the religious leaders in Iran, but he had enough.

“We must ask them what kind of government they want instead of asking people to say yes or no to an Islamic republic.”

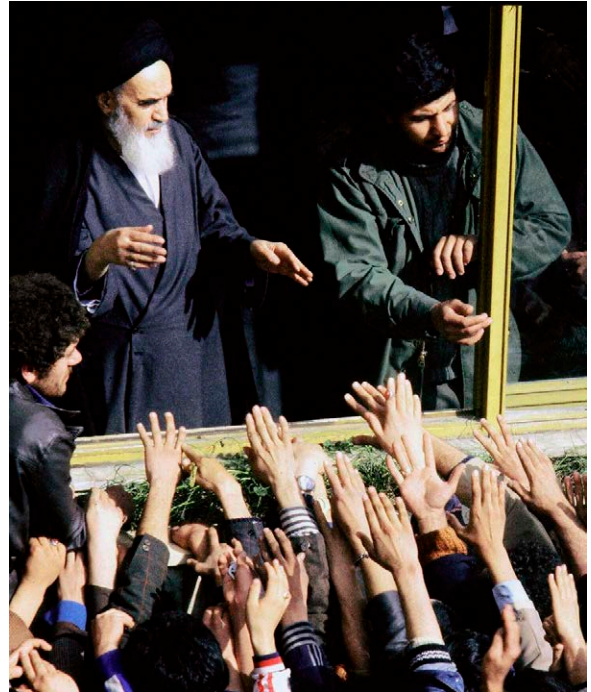
—Ayatollah Shariatmadari, March 13, 1979

Ninety-eight percent of twenty million Iranians voted for an Islamic republic. At this point, Iranians began a months-long debate about exactly what the phrase “Islamic Republic” meant. A process of drafting a new constitution began.



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Prime Minister Shahpour Bahktiar.



Gabriel Duval/AFP © Getty Images. Used with permission.

February 2, 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini is greeted by his supporters after returning from exile.

“All this happened in the hopes of having an Islamic republic, but what exactly will this republic be?”

—former Prime Minister Bahktiar,
March 25, 1979

Iran was a country in turmoil: groups from all points of the political spectrum attempted to assert that their vision for the future of Iran was the correct one. Some shared Khomeini’s vision for an Islamic state. Some hoped for a reorganization of society along socialist lines. Others wished for an Iran with an effective parliamentary system of government, ruled with checks and balances. The unity Iranians had used to overthrow the shah was dissolving.

In the coming days, you will have an opportunity to recreate this debate with your classmates. As you do, keep in mind what you have discovered in the reading. You should strive to put yourselves in the shoes of Iranians in early 1979 by considering how history may have shaped their outlook and politics.