

The Iranian Revolution at the Twilight of the Workers' Council



A short history and analysis of the Iranian Revolution with a focus on the role of the working class and the rise and fall of the *shoras* workers councils.

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The shadow of 1917 stretches across the century.

Forty years ago, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the monarchy of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, paving the way for the establishment of the Islamic Republic. While the 1979 revolution united an array of social groups in a revolt against despotism and foreign domination, it didn't take long for the conflicts hidden beneath this unity to emerge. Soon the "Freedom Spring," caught between the pincers of the Iran Hostage Crisis and the Iraq–Iran war, was followed by the scorching summer of Islamist counterrevolution.

There is nothing unique in a mass popular uprising bringing to power an authoritarian state, alas. But the religious character of the Iranian Revolution has made it difficult to understand what it shares with other stories of revolution and counterrevolution. It is not easy to see through the four decades of war in the region — directly and indirectly the result of US attempts to encircle the Soviet Union and ensure access to Middle East oil — and recall the original emancipatory promise of the 1979 uprising, which followed a revolutionary script involving mass strikes and councils that resembles to a large degree the Russian and German revolutions at the beginning of the century.

Indeed, the power of the Iranian workers' movement can be traced directly back to a global 1917.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as world capitalism began its shift to a wondrous new energy source — oil, more energy-dense and transportable than coal — thousands of Iranian workers began to migrate to the Azerbaijani city of Baku, then part of the Russian Empire, to work the prosperous oil fields. Here, they were exposed to the radical and heterodox activists of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, soon to be split into its Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. A citywide general strike in Baku in 1904 had set the stage for the first Russian Revolution of 1905. The reverberations of that revolution wave soon spread to Tehran, with the unrest pressing the shah to approve a constitution, delegating power to a newly formed parliament. The unrest in Iran only dissipated with the invasion of Russian forces in 1911.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the ensuing civil war played out across the whole of Eurasia, spilling from Eastern and Central Europe into China. With the overthrow of the czar, the revolution removed the main sponsor of the Qajars, the dynasty that ruled Iran. In 1920, in the midst of civil war in Russia, the Soviets lent their support to the short-lived Persian Soviet Socialist Republic, formed in the Caspian Sea province of Gilan, which bordered Azerbaijan. This was largely an attempt to shore up their southern flank, where the Russian counterrevolutionaries were attempting to regather their forces. General Denikin, leader of the reactionary White Army, had taken refuge in the Gilan port city of Anzali, with British assistance. The Soviet Caspian fleet eventually chased the White and British forces out, lending its support to Mirza Kuchak Khan, a revolutionary nationalist who led a peasant-based guerrilla army called

the Jangal, or “jungle,” movement in attacks against the British and the Whites. The Soviets forged a link between the Jangal movement and the fledgling Iranian Communist Party, formed out of a Baku group. Kuchak Khan, however, failed to make even the most minimal redistributive gestures, such as land reform, and tensions within his own party allowed the communists to seize power briefly. The tide turned quickly though, and in 1921 Reza Khan seized power in a military coup, eventually crowning himself shah, and inaugurating the Pahlavi dynasty. Anxious to shore up their borders, the Soviets agreed to withdraw, abandoning the nascent communist movement, a glimpse of the sort of opportunist realpolitik that would be their defining feature.

THE SHORAS AND DUAL POWER

The Iranian working class therefore had a longer and richer revolutionary tradition to draw on than many of their contemporaries elsewhere in the Middle East, through direct contact with the beating heart of the international communist movement. In the official narrative of the 1979 revolution, at least in the US, the Iranian working class is at most a backdrop to a dramatic play between personalities: the departure of the detested shah; the triumphant return of the righteous cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, from exile, greeted, like Lenin arriving at Finland Station, as a hero of the revolution by throngs of the hopeful. But behind each of these events lay coordinated working class struggle by one of the most developed centers of workers’ resistance in the Middle East. A strike wave built throughout 1978 and into the decisive events of 1979, following a profound weakening of the economy, as the sugar high of the OPEC oil-boom era began to wear off. Pumping petrodollars into the economy had led to inflation — a global trend in the late 1970s — and workers saw their wages eaten away by rising rents and other cost increases. The shah attempted to scapegoat the traditional merchant and artisan class — the bazaari — suggesting that profiteering, corruption, and waste were responsible for inflation. The bazaari had long presented an obstacle to would-be capitalist modernizers, but they were a powerful layer, controlling the economy through local credit systems and neighborhood trade. They were located physically in the bazaars, proximate to the mosques, and thus had deep familial and neighborhood ties to the clergy. The shah’s attempt to break the power of this layer as part of his modernization campaign led to widespread discontent.

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The workers therefore joined a movement in 1978 that had already mobilized many other layers of Iranian society. Universities had been shut down since the beginning of the previous year, when demonstrations against the regime gave way to massacres by regime forces, an old story. The workers perhaps arrived late, but their intervention was decisive. The rolling wave of mass strikes culminated in a general strike in November 1978, shutting down even the oil refineries, the lynchpin of the Iranian economy. Once the refineries went, so did the shah, first by offering the usual suite of constitutional concessions, elections, and other long-withheld bourgeois kindnesses, and then departing the stage altogether. His appointee, former opposition leader Shapour Bakhtiar, was instantly disowned by the majority of his own party, the National Front, who instead embraced the radical cleric Khomeini. Khomeini quickly assembled a provisional government, declaring Bakhtiar illegitimate and calling for a peaceful transition. The masses, however, were not ready to listen to these calls for caution, even from someone they had selected as their leader.

The fate of revolutions hangs, in the last instance, on the disposition of the military. Here, the shah’s control over the regular Iranian Army units had been shaky, and disaffection was widespread. On February 9, 1979, after a group of pro-Khomeini technicians at the main air base outside Tehran mutinied, pro-shah elite units, called “Immortals,” attacked the base. The rifts in the state shone bright, a moment of opportunity had arrived. Word spread throughout the city. Barricades went up. Far-left guerilla groups rushed into the city to confront the shock troops. Police stations and military barracks were overrun. An arms factory was raided and over fifty thousand weapons expropriated and distributed

to the insurgents. Prisons were blown open. Government buildings occupied. On February 11, the TV and radio stations declared the victory of the revolution.

At the center of the mobilization were the working class committees — shoras — which had evolved out of the strike committees of November the previous year. In the context of the insurrection, these committees flourished. The shoras developed out of the real needs of the workers after the collapse of the shah's regime. Many owners and managers, particularly of state-owned firms close to the regime, had fled. The workers took over the factories and ran them through their councils. This holiday of workers' self-organization was brief, however, as Khomeini and forces within the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) that had formed around him immediately began to weaken the power of the shoras as an independent base of working class action. For many, though, this brief glimpse was enough. A new horizon of workers emancipation had opened. As one metalworker, quoted in an article on the subject, put it: "After the revolution, the workers noticed that the country belonged to them." Workers' demands were various, both specific and general, though in most cases they seemed to fall short of calls for the end of capitalism.

The character and composition of the shoras differed in every workplace, and they only really became a force to reckon with once the difficult task of restarting production had begun. The dual-power situation was complex, and involved a delicate balance between the provisional government and the various forces mobilized both for and against it. Alongside the shoras, komitehs (armed security groups) patrolled neighborhoods to keep out regime thugs, and other councils, shora-ye mahallat, sprang up in poor neighborhoods, serving as associations of the unemployed. Even with the workers' committees restarting production, the Iranian economy was operating far below its previous level, and in the poorest areas the need was great.

This was a grasp on power the class was loath to relinquish, and instead of a frontal assault, Khomeini pursued a course of Islamization of the councils, which over time had the effect of reintroducing one-man management and a formal division of labor. The shoras would no longer have any say over issues of production itself, and instead be limited to the sphere of wages.

Nonetheless, in this springtime of the Iranian workers' movement, new possibilities emerged, which the contending factions of the Iranian left would have to negotiate. One narrative suggests that the strategic errors of the left lay in the inability of the communists, instrumental to the early flourishing of the councils, to form any sort of common program with regard to the IRP around Khomeini. The main communist party, the Tudeh, once on the brink of seizing power in the 1950s, inherited from Stalin a vision of national liberation as a precursor to eventual social revolution, and took the position that the clergy were a "progressive bourgeoisie" capable of preparing the ground for eventual socialism in Iran through modernization. The Iranian New Left, formed from a mixture of Marxist-Leninist and Third-Worldist theory combined with new strains of radical Islam, shared with the Stalinists a developmentalist vision that put principal emphasis on the anti-imperial struggle, terrain that the clergy and its bazaari allies would easily capture.

Though members of the Tudeh found themselves involved in the shoras, as a party they argued instead for the formation of a national council of unions, like the CGT in France. The newer leftist groups, however, were less hesitant about the participation of the shoras in the revolution. Among these New Left groups, the Fedaiyan was the largest Marxist-Leninist organization, and was central to the climactic urban phases of insurrection. They were instrumental in setting up rural shoras, such as the Turkmen Sahra Peasant Council, formed when wage workers of a large agribusiness in northeast Iran took it over after the departure of the owners in early 1979. The new government attacked the peasant council, and the Fedaiyan was drawn into the conflict on the side of the peasants, forcing some within the organization to break with the government.

From the early days of the revolution, the mosque was the center of neighborhood organizing, which had largely been repressed everywhere else. This gave the advantage to those who controlled the mosque network — namely the komitehs. Slowly, the komitehs became the bases for the Khomeinist movement. The revolutionary courts of the komitehs dispensed swift justice, but as long as they were executing members of the old regime and its secret police, no one complained. But soon they were arresting Marxists and other “counterrevolutionaries,” forcing a minority within the Fedaiyan to split from the group and join smaller left groups, such as the radical Islamic Mojahidin, which opposed to the new government of Khomeini. But this was too little, too late — the decisive moment of opportunity for the councils had past.

ANTI-IMPERIALISM

All groups were united in opposition to the regime of the shah and, in particular, to the power of the United States over Iranian affairs. The shah had been installed following the Allied invasion of Iran during the Second World War, and then brought back to power in a 1953 coup, a brazen display of the new state-making powers of the CIA. This had been undertaken not only to undermine the nationalist government of Mohammed Mossadegh, who had nationalized the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, but to forestall the possibility of the Stalinist Tudeh party taking power.

The shah combined the worst excesses of hated monarchical power with crony capitalism, acquiescing to the US and Britain’s control over the Iranian oil industry and engaging in a process of modernization decidedly American in character. This meant that the revolution, when it occurred, would turn increasingly on these questions of Westernization and geopolitical power, ground upon which the demands of the working class in councils receded into the distance. This was the basis of the Tudeh and the Fedaiyan Majority alignment with the IRP, whose revolutionary authenticity was vouchsafed by its opposition to the US. Today, as a new, crude anti-imperialism tries to cleanly divide the nations of the world into camps, claiming their toiling masses for its own crude, mechanistic view of socialism, we would do well to take note of this narrative.

In this context, Khomeini’s declaration on March 7 that women must wear Islamic dress when entering government buildings became entangled with questions about the relationship of the Iranian economy to the West. As it happened, the following day, March 8, was International Women’s Day, and many women took to the streets to demonstrate against the measure. Women were involved at every level of the revolutionary mobilizations of the period, in guerilla groups and councils and strike committees, and a large portion of revolutionary organizing, particularly around everyday needs, took place through women’s networks. Khomeini’s injunction to women was an invocation of their power as revolutionaries, not a call for them to remain passive, and he described the hijab as part of a revolt against the shah’s society and everything it represented. The Tudeh and Fedaiyan parties were hesitant to challenge what they felt was an abidingly popular narrative.

They had good reason. People voted overwhelmingly in an April 1979 referendum for the establishment of an “Islamic Republic,” but the term itself was ambiguous, and meant different things to different people. Not everyone envisioned it as the rule of the clergy and the imposition of a strict interpretation of Islamic Law. For some, it meant a liberal democratic government where Islam was the guiding cultural principle. For others, it meant a radical convergence of Islam and socialism.

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These diverging visions of the role of Islam need to be understood in the context of the backstory of the revolution, and particularly its origins in the shah’s so-called “White Revolution,” a series of reforms which aimed to modernize Iranian society and break the power of the clergy and large landlords. These included plans for rapid industrialization and land reform, but also literacy programs, extension of the

franchise to women, and a profit-sharing plan for workers. The shah's plan to modernize the country was in some respects remarkably successful, and, by the early 1970s, Iran was in a position that would have been unthinkable two decades earlier. The oil boom had swollen the state's coffers, allowing it to easily fund its own projects. But development never comes without contradictions. The land reforms caused millions of now-landless laborers to flood into the cities, particularly Tehran, swelling their shantytowns.

The land reforms had radical, unintended effects on Iranian society. The main purpose of the land reform was to extend capitalist relations into the countryside, by creating titles for land to which peasants had often only had conventional rights. But agricultural revolution doesn't just require a change in the structure of property. New, more highly productive techniques must be brought in, displacing millions. Some entered the manufacturing and industrial sector, but many more, when they could find any employment at all, worked as manual laborers in the ever-expanding construction industry, building skyscrapers and apartment buildings for the rich, or in the service sector. By 1971, millions of new residents had entered Tehran. Disconnected from traditional networks, many of these new workers connected with each other through the mosque.

While a cross section of society was opposed to the shah's reforms — portions of the clergy and the landlords in particular, having the most to lose — Khomeini positioned himself at the forefront of the resistance. A widely respected cleric, Khomeini had risen to a position of prominence within the clergy as a *marja'* (a position of authority, but literally "model to be imitated"). This is when Khomeini first entered the scene as an opposition figure. He used his sermons to attack the regime. He was particularly vocal about the presence of US servicemen and advisors, recently granted diplomatic immunity, and indeed his example was imitated. In June 1963, mass rioting in the religious capital of Qom broke out after the arrest of Khomeini, lasting for days. The government repression was severe, with hundreds killed.

Many of the Iranian New Left forces emerged in the period following these events. Inspired by anti-imperialist guerilla movements in Cuba, Vietnam, and Algeria, this generation saw armed struggle as the main vehicle for revolution. Particularly important here, alongside the Fedaiyan, were the left-Islamic Mujahideen-e Khalq, whose ideology was a synthesis of Marxist Third Worldism and a radical interpretation of Islam. The main ideologue of the Mujahideen was the theorist Ali Shariati, responsible for the translation of Frantz Fanon's work into Persian.

Given the requirements of clandestine activity, the guerrillas were unable to build a social base in the workplace, even if some members worked in factories. Instead, their urban base was drawn largely from the student milieu and the middle class. Under the conditions of extreme repression that existed in Iran in the late 1960s and early seventies, they saw working class self-activity as largely impossible, instead focusing almost exclusively on guerilla actions against the state. In the words of Amir Parviz Pouyan, an important theorist of the guerilla movement, they were confronted with the "absolute power of the state, and the absolute weakness of the working class." The guerrillas ended up stuck in a tit-for-tat battle with the state.

Students were an essential part of the revolution. In the sixties and seventies, Iranian students increasingly went abroad for higher education, encouraged by the shah's regime to acquire the technical training thought necessary for economic development. This provided the basis for a strong and militant student movement, both inside and outside the country. The sixties and seventies were, of course, a period of intense conflict and unrest across campuses in the West, and radical Iranian students quickly became involved in organizing. The Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad became a major base for opposition to the regime, its newsletter circulating information about strikes and guerilla activity. The Confederation was also involved in the militant student movements of international students' host countries, supporting demonstrations against the Vietnam War and other imperialist aggression. By the 1970s, the Confederation was so dominated by communist organizations that many of the important

Islamist members left and formed the Muslim Students Association. Both served as sources of information for their respective counterparts back home.

What they could agree on was the intolerable power of the US. As it happened, they were forced onto this terrain by the actions of the Khomeinists. On November 4, 1979 the US embassy in Tehran was seized by the "Students of the Iman's Line." The hostage crisis captured the country and the world's attention, dragging on for 444 days. The spectacle of the embassy seizure, and President Carter's bungled attempt to rescue the hostages, allowed the Islamic right to seize the initiative, positioning itself as the victorious vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle, while at the same time pushing aside the liberals. In the face of the crisis, the provisional government resigned and a new constitution was ratified, filled with Third Worldist and anti-imperialist language but also relying on the concept of the velayat-i faqih (guardianship of the jurispudent), and establishing the "leader principle" in Iran. Under this constitution, Khomeini, as the "supreme leader of the revolution," was given the power to veto any decision that went against Islam. But a presidential election was also held, with the overwhelming majority voting for Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. Though Bani-Sadr had long been one of Khomeini's favored advisors, he represented the technocratic "liberal Islamist" wing of the revolution, and a threat to the IRP's consolidation of power.

COUNTERREVOLUTION

In April 1980, the government of the Islamic Republic, authorized by its new constitution, launched its Cultural Revolution, beginning the process of Islamization of universities, workplaces, and cultural institutions. The Cultural Revolution was intended to anchor the state's power over society in the schools and media. Schools and universities were closed for three years, during which time the left was thoroughly purged from staff, and strict religious codes implemented.

In the arena of labor, what followed was a battle between the Khomeinist right, organized around the IRP, and Bani-Sadr. The Khomeinists use the councils to push back against Bani-Sadr's state-appointed managers, effectively sidelining the workers' demands of the previous year and undermining the independent shoras themselves. Revolutionary guards attack the last few remaining independent councils.

Before that conflict could run its course, however, and before the hostage crisis was resolved, Iraq invaded Iran on September 22, 1980, hoping to take advantage of the chaos. The mobilization drew millions to the side of the regime, allowing it to cloak itself in the language of anti-imperialism, fighting a war against Iraq and its backers in the United States. Martial law and the austerity of a war economy were fertile ground for counterrevolution. All strikes and demonstrations were treated by the new regime as imperialist sabotage, and the Khomeinist right was allowed to enforce order in the streets with gangs of thugs.

The IRP used the opportunity to instigate a new mobilization against Bani-Sadr and his liberal supporters. With Khomeini's approval, Iran's parliament, dominated by the IRP, voted to impeach Bani-Sadr. In a last-ditch attempt to save himself, Bani-Sadr allied with the Mujahideen, whose clash with the new regime spilled over into open armed conflict. The Mujahideen unleashed a campaign of terror against the regime, killing dozens of IRP officials and ministers. With the Iraqi army bearing down on the front lines, the regime had all the cover it needed to annihilate the last vestiges of the left, shuttering newspapers, disbanding associations, and arresting and executing all who resisted.

It is tempting to lay the blame entirely at the feet of Khomeini and the IRP, who certainly outmaneuvered their counterparts. But the conditions in which the Iranian left had to operate were exceedingly difficult. While the workers' councils made great strides in democratizing the workplaces, the capitalist division of labor itself provided an incredible obstacle to the emancipatory thrust of the proletarian movement. There were profound conflicts among workers with regard to skill and education, between the long-

established working class and new arrivals. Most Iranian production remained organized in workshops too small for councils. Although the councils were spread throughout society, there was no vision of organizing them into an alternative to the state. State power itself was never questioned, only the people who occupied it. The councils were primarily seen, not only by the official left but by many of the workers who filled them, as pressure groups through which they could act on the state. Even the most radical demands issued by the councils fell short of an explicit call for the abolition of capitalism. While the councils did rush into the gap in order to take care of basic social functions, this was a power most gave up too easily. Blinded by decades of Stalinism, most of the existing left had no vision of self-organization, nor a thought of what the economy might be beyond the nationalization of industry. Where such a vision had taken root, it was mostly outside the heart of the revolution.

Nonetheless, the Iranian Revolution might earn the dubious honor of being the last time the workers' council appeared in its classical form. Or rather, it shares that honor with Poland, where in more or less the same period of time, the *Solidarność* movement would likewise emerge through a flourishing of councils in a period of political and economic instability. But these late flourishings of the workers' council take place in a period of retrenchment for workers' movement, as deindustrialization and a series of neoliberal projects unrolled across the planet, leveling most resistance. The last ten years, however, have seen a renewal of protest and rebellion in Iran and throughout the Middle East, and a new era of class conflict globally. In each of these cases, the US, Russia, and other world powers, as always, stood with weapons ready, willing to intervene at a moment's notice if their interests demanded it. In such a situation, a revival of class struggle in Iran and its neighbors is the only hope of avoiding another forty years of war.