

Introduction: The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution

Misagh Parsa

The Iranian revolution of 1979 surprised and challenged many observers of Iran and scholars of revolution. The revolution toppled a regime that had promoted economic development for decades and enjoyed the support of a strong military and a secret police force capable of checking the unruly. Iranian peasants played only an inconsequential role in the revolutionary process. A broad urban-based coalition demanding freedom and social justice carried out the revolutionary struggles, but power was eventually seized by a segment of the clergy using various measures to establish a theocracy. The theocracy's rulers and supporters excluded their coalition partners: liberal, secular, and religious nationalists; Islamic and secular socialists; and communists. In these important ways, the outcome of the Iranian revolution diverged from most other twentieth-century revolutions, which were led by secular intellectuals fighting to establish either democracy or some form of socialism.

The unusual characteristics of the Iranian revolution generated a great deal of scholarly debate about the causes, processes, and outcome of this revolution and of revolutions in general. Although earlier scholars examined large-scale changes in class structures and major economic transformations to explain social revolutions, a number of analysts of the Iranian revolution rejected such explanations as inadequate or insignificant in explaining the revolution. Other analysts shifted their focus from class to political structures and processes. Some of these theorists claimed that the potential autonomy of the state and political processes were central in generating revolutionary struggles. Still others emphasized the role of ideological transformations among Iranians during the years prior to the revolution. These analysts generally claimed that various developments including rapid modernization, Westernization, dislocations, and erosion of traditional social structures generated anomie and normlessness and led many Iranians to seek new ideologies for reintegration. In their view, large-scale Iranian conversion to Islamic ideology led to the Islamic revolution and the establishment of a theocracy.

Thirty years after the revolution, a number of esteemed social scientists address some of the central issues of the revolution in this issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Misagh Parsa focuses on the role of classes, state, and ideology in the Iranian revolution. Jack A. Goldstone's essay offers a rethinking of the causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutions. The articles by Eric Selbin and Behrooz Moazami examine the course of the revolution and explain its immediate political outcome. Most of the remaining contributions deal with major aspects of the revolution's outcome. The article by Haideh Moghissi analyzes women's political struggles and their employment within the Islamic Republic. Saeed

Comparative Studies of
South Asia, Africa and
the Middle East
Vol. 29, No. 1, 2009
doi:10.1215/1089201x-2008-039
© 2009 by Duke University Press

Rahnema, who was deeply involved in the revolutionary struggles, analyzes the causes of the failure of the Left and the labor movement in the revolution. Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani focus on the impact of the revolution on class structure and its political ramifications. The article by Eva Patricia Rakel examines the political elite and factionalism in the Islamic Republic over the past thirty years. Mansoor Moaddel analyzes recent changes in Iranian views on a range of issues related to economic, political, and gender relations. Finally, Manochehr Dorraj and Michael Dodson present a comparative analysis of the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and discuss the viability of populism in the two countries.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution, as scholars of social conflict and political change debate and strive to understand the causes, processes, and outcome of the Iranian revolution, the Islamic regime and its organs still struggle to impose and enforce their religious principles and supremacy. Meanwhile, ordinary Iranians and victims of the social and historical processes strive to assert their own rights and fight injustice and exploitation whenever conditions are proper and opportunities favorable. The Iranian revolution unleashed powerful forces and generated new contradictions and conflicts that have yet to reach their climax. Scholars of large-scale social transformation and political change would do well to continue to investigate and analyze momentous events such as the Iranian revolution to understand and explain the eruption of future struggles and transformations. S