

THE SHAH'S WHITE REVOLUTION AND KHOMEINI'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

In January 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran inaugurated his programme for a 'White Revolution'. On January 9, he announced a six-point plan, outlining the basic principles of the 'revolution'. This programme called for land reforms; nationalisation of forests; sale of state-owned enterprises to the public; workers' profit sharing in 20 per cent of net corporate earnings; voting and political rights for women, and foundation of the literacy corps.¹ Towards the end of the month, on January 26, 1963, a referendum approved the programme of the revolution by more than 99 per cent of the votes cast. The *New York Times* hailed this as a great achievement and evidence of the Shah's personal popularity. In an editorial comment, it said: 'The great mass of the Iranian people are doubtless behind the Shah in his bold new reform efforts. The national plebiscite he called early this year gave emphatic evidence of this'.² The six points were later, in 1964-65, increased to nine, in 1967, to 12 and finally in 1975, to 15.³

Claiming a distinctive role for his revolution, the Shah maintained that it would lead to the enjoyment of basic rights by all of Iran's people, instead of, as in the past, the rights remaining 'in the hands of only a few'. He launched this programme of revolutionising Iranian society with the conviction that 'God had ordained me to do certain things that perhaps could not be done by anyone else'. It was marked by two 'sacred principles', namely 'emphasis on spirit and religion and preservation of individual and social freedom'. This revolution, he asserted, was 'essentially an Iranian revolution' and not 'an imported item', for it was not the Iranian habit 'to wear anything borrowed'.⁴ Notwithstanding the extensive publicity of the White Revolution as serving the interests of the poor masses, it was firmly opposed by the National Front as well as by the clergy, and both boycotted the referendum. It was later held by opposition leaders that the entire programme of the White Revolution was inspired by America to advance her own interests. Its real purpose, they maintained, had been to open Iranian markets to American capital penetration and to ensure Iran's economic dependence on oil revenues through the destruction of its national economic structure,⁵ including the disruption of Iranian agriculture to open the way for agricultural imports from America.⁶ The opposition maintained that the White Revolution was neither white, because it led to large-scale massacres, nor a revolution, because it hardly affected, much less improved, the lot of the poor peasantry.⁷

The Shah insisted that the agrarian reforms, as embodied in the White Revolution, were opposed by the clergy because it challenged their vested interests in private landholdings, which, beyond stated limits, the new law subjected to redistribution among the landless. He believed that the opposition was made up of an 'unholy alliance of the two forces of black reaction and red destruction. They were financed by a group of landowners who were affected by the land reform law'.⁸ Recounting his achievements in this field, the Shah later asserted that, prior to 1963, only 0.2 per cent owned 33.8 per cent

of the cultivable land, whereas during the 15 years of the White Revolution 2 million landless peasants became land-owners and 20 billion rials were loaned to peasant farmers through 2,871 co-operatives.⁹

Opponents of the Shah have, however, argued that the programme of land reform was no more than a hoax, which in fact, only benefited the absentee landlords who were the Shah's henchmen. They maintain that in reality there was little concentration of land ownership, and most of the land was owned by small land-holders. Land was redistributed among no more than 2.5 million tenant farmers, out of whom over 2 million farmers received an average of less than 3 hectares, which was evidently too small a piece of land to provide an adequate source of income for them. Similarly, the average amount of credit facilities provided was not sufficient to meet even a fraction of normal farm expenses. In 1977, for instance, the entire money loaned to 1.32 million farmers amounted to 30.1 billion rials, which meant an average of 22,800 rials, or about \$ 300, per farmer.¹⁰

With hardly any prospects of making good money at home, many a village youth migrated to the cities which, apart from their charm and glamour, offered easy job opportunities owing to large-scale construction activities in urban areas. As a consequence, despite the land reforms, agricultural output declined so much that the country had to resort to large-scale imports of agricultural commodities. The country which until two years before the White Revolution, was agriculturally self-sufficient except in sugar and vegetable oil was, by 1977, importing 500,000 tons of barley and corn, about an equal quantity of rice (40 per cent of the country's total consumption), 130,000 tons of meat, 50,000 tons of cheese and butter, and 17,000 tons of eggs every year. The average import of wheat had reached a level of 1.2 million tons a year in the early seventies.¹¹

Another important plank of the White Revolution concerned the emancipation of women in society. The clergy were again blamed for the opposition to this aspect of the reform, with the contention that they wished to keep women tied to their homes so as to keep them subjugated to male domination, on the pretext of avoiding immoral mixing of the sexes. The clerics denied this charge, and, in Khomeini's words, forcefully asserted that 'Islam has never opposed [women's] liberty. It is the Shah who is dragging women towards corruption and wishes to bring them up as mere dolls.'¹²

Ayatollah Rouhulla Khomeini spearheaded the movement against the White Revolution. Born on September 24, 1902 in a deeply religious family in Khomein, a small town in central Iran, he lost his father when he was some five months old. Khomeini received his early education in his home town and at the age of 19 moved to Arak for higher religious studies under the guidance of Ayatollah Ha'eri who was one of the most outstanding religious scholars of his time. A year later Khomeini accompanied Ha'eri to Qum where after completing his education with distinction he took to teaching. Ha'eri died in 1937 and was succeeded by Ayatollah Burujirdi as the head of the religious teaching institution at Qum as well as the undisputed shi'ite leader with hardly any interest in politics. With the death of Burujirdi in 1962 the mantle of leadership fell on Khomeini. In sharp contrast to his predecessor, Khomeini combined religious erudition, deep interest in political affairs and extraordinary courage to confront the Pahlavi

regime.¹³ He bitterly criticised both the revolutionary programme and the motives underlying it. As a consequence, tension began to mount. Within two months of the referendum on March 22, 1963, there was a serious clash between a religious gathering and the police. This resulted in many casualties among students of the Madrased Faiziyeh, a famous institution for religious education at Qum. Khomeini raised his voice in strong protest. In a telegram to the Prime Minister, Asadollah A'lam, he compared the attack of the security forces on the religious gathering to the barbarity of the Mongols. 'It seems', he said, 'as if loyalty to the Shah means destruction, sacrilege to Islam and violation of the rights of Muslims. Loyalty to the Shah means delivering a blow to the Quran and burning down the traces of Islam. Silence is no longer justified, and declaration of truth is incumbent'.¹⁴ This protest aroused widespread support throughout the country, and culminated in what is now generally known as the 15 Khordad massacre.

Some two and a half months later, on the 10th of Muharram, (June 3, 1963), Khomeini addressed a large gathering at the Madrased Faiziyeh. In a challenging speech, he criticised the intentions of the regime, which he said, was out to destroy all that was Islamic at the behest of Israel and America. 'As they see', he declared, 'that the Quran is a wall in their way, they want to shatter this wall; since the Madrased Faiziyeh is a hindrance in their way, it must be demolished and ruined.' Addressing the Shah directly, he said: 'I advise you — the Faith and the Quran make it my duty and the law gives me the right to advise you — stay away from these acts . . . I do not like you to end up like your father . . . Do not oppose the religious scholars . . . I hope your intention is not the religious scholars when you say, "the black reactionaries are like dirty beasts; one must keep away from them"; otherwise our job will become difficult, and yours will become much more so. We will not allow you to live in this country; the nation will not allow you to live [here]. Don't do it. Listen to my advice'. Khomeini then referred to the three terms offered by the Government for resolving the conflict and reaching an agreement with the clergy: the clergy should not criticize the Shah, say nothing about the state of Israel,¹⁵ and refrain from making any statement to the effect that the faith was in danger under the Pahlavi regime. 'If we put these three issues aside', said Khomeini, 'then what is there left to talk about'.¹⁶

Demonstrations against the Government continued and Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani, the leader of *Nehzat-i-Azadi-i-Iran* (Movement for the liberation of Iran), was arrested. Khomeini, too, was taken into Police custody, at Qum, during the night, and promptly shifted to Tehran. These arrests led to more processions and demonstrations in Tehran, Mashhad, Qum, Isfahan, Shiraz and several other cities. They protested against the detention of Khomeini and other leaders, such as Ayatollah Qummi in Mashhad and Ayatollah Mahallati in Shiraz. According to one estimate, some 15,000 people were killed in three days of demonstrations and rioting.¹⁷

The ruthless suppression of all opposition to the Government was ordered by the Shah himself. When Margaret Laing asked Asadollah A'lam, in October 1975, whether the demonstrations had been really so serious as to justify the measures taken by the army, he replied: 'Indeed . . . it was a very serious business, it had to be . . . There was very severe coalition against the Government . . . from the clergy who were losing their profits

and the landlords who were losing their land and the communists who were losing fertile ground for propaganda'. Therefore, when he asked the Shah "Do you allow me to shoot?, to order shooting?", he said, "Yes, not only I allow, I back you". When a few persons, including a former Minister, requested him to take a more lenient view, the Shah 'not only refused, but he threw them out of the room. He not only did that but he immediately summoned me and ordered me to detain all of them and put them in gaol'.¹⁸

Although the Shah held that the clergy and the communists constituted an 'unholy alliance of the two forces of black reaction and red destruction' – directly responsible for the trouble, he singled out Khomeini 'who claimed to be religious even though his origin was obscure' and alleged that 'it was certain, however, that he had secret dealings with foreign agents'.¹⁹

The apprehension that the Government might try to execute Khomeini alarmed his followers and the clerics alike. Ayatollah Shariatmadari, one of the highest ranking religious leaders, in the meantime, secretly moved to the Shrine of Shah Abdul Azim at Rey, near Tehran, where he was later joined by other distinguished clergymen, including Ayatollah Milani from Mashhad, Ayatollah Behbehani from Khuzistan, Ayatollah Rafeei from Qazvin, and Ayatollah Akhund Hamadani from Hamadan, to work out a strategy for averting the possible execution of Ayatollah Khomeini as well as securing his release.

Invoking a constitutional provision that guaranteed legal immunity to *mujtahids* (authorities on divine law), the ulama who had gathered at Shah Abdul Azim publicly proclaimed Ayatollah Khomeini a *mujtahid* and *marja*.²⁰ This was followed up by a similar religious injunction by Ayatollah Najafi Mara'shi. The efforts of these leading ulama, whose religious eminence was well-established and popularly recognized, bore fruit and the Government refrained from taking any serious punitive action against Khomeini.²¹

In October 1964, the Iranian Majlis passed two bills of far-reaching importance. One of these granted diplomatic immunity to American military personnel and their families residing in Iran, and put them beyond the reach of Iranian courts. The other approved the use of an American loan of \$200 million for the purchase of military hardware from the United States. Reacting promptly with a hard-hitting speech, Khomeini subjected both the bills to seathing criticism. 'They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog', he said and added 'If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, the head of State, no one will have the right to interfere with him. Why? Because they wanted a loan and America demanded this in return . . . Are we to be trampled under foot by the boots of America simply because we are a weak nation and have no dollars? America is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them. They are all worse and more unclean than each other! But today, it is America that we were concerned with . . . We do not regard as law what they claim to have passed. We do not regard this Majlis as a Majlis. We do not regard this Government as a government. They are traitors, guilty of high treason'.²²

For lack of a better practical alternative a few days later, on November 4, 1964 the Government deported Khomeini to Turkey. In the words of the Shah, 'He was neither

condemned, nor even judged; he was simply requested to go and exercise his incendiary eloquence elsewhere'.²³

NOTES

1. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York, 1980), Appendix-I, p. 193.
2. *New York Times*, June 10, 1963, quoted in Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (University of Pittsburg Press, 1964), p. 209.
3. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.
4. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *The White Revolution* (Tehran, 1967), pp. 3, 16-17.
5. Ahmad Farouqhy, 'Repression in Iran' in Al-Reza Nobari, ed., *Iran Erupts* (Stanford, 1978), p. 64.
6. *The Message of Peace*, Vol. I, No. 2 (Qum), July 10, 1979, p. 22.
7. Kalim Siddiqui, ed., *The Islamic Revolution in Iran: Transcript of four lectures given by Hamid Algar at the Muslim Institute, London*, (London, 1980), p. 22.
8. Mohammad Shah Pahlavi, *The white Revolution*, p.37.
9. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *The Shah's Story* (London, 1980), pp. 78-79.
10. Mohammad Gholi Majd, "Reforming Land Reform", *The Iranian* (Tehran), August 8, 1979, p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, 'A Bad Performance', *The Iranian* (Tehran), August 1, 1979, p. 11.
12. *Time*, January 29, 1979, p. 8.
13. Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, (Berkeley, 1981), pp. 13-15.
14. *The Message of Peace*, p. 22.
15. *De facto* recognition was accorded to State of Israel by the Shah on July 23, 1960, Margaret Laing, *The Shah* (London, 1977), p. 204.
16. *The Message of Peace*, pp. 23-24.
17. Hamid Algar, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
18. Margaret Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-169.
19. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *The White Revolution*, p. 37.
20. 'A scholar of proven learning and piety whose authoritative rulings one follows in matters of religious practice.' Hamid Algar, *op. cit.*, p. 309.
21. *The Message of Peace*, pp. 16, 20.
22. Hamid Algar, *op. cit.* For full text of the speech, see pp. 181-189.
23. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, *The Shah's Story*, p. 77.