Ascendancy

*How the clergy rose to power in Iran during the Islamic Revolution*

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Introduction

This is a study on the complexity of domestic groups within a revolution. Various scholars such as Theda Skocpol and John Foran have written theories which look to decipher and explain revolutions and their causes. Throughout history revolutions have seen periods where various parties struggle for power. This paper looks at such a period of struggle and a specific contender. The period of struggle is defined as the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution up until the consolidation of power in 1983, whereas the contender is defined as the clergy. The Iranian Revolution is generally confined to the outbreak in 1978 up until the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. This paper analyses a much larger timeframe, namely up to 1983, which is the year when Khomeini pledged the clergy would retreat from political life when the public “gets on the right track”. Subsequently this paper seeks to understand how the clergy obtained such a powerful position during the first few years of the Islamic Republic. By doing so, rather than solely focussing on the preamble, this approach should result in a more thorough analysis of said clergy.

Firstly, this paper will discuss the debate on the role of the clergy in theory. Various scholars have attempted to explain their rise to power during the revolution of 1979 and have used different arguments to back up their claims. As many of the discussions were held within the first decade following the outbreak of the revolution it was often hard to fully understand the parts that various groups played during the revolution. Discussing some of these theories with regard to the clergy will show their strengths and weaknesses on this specific theme, as well as the role that various theorists have given to the clergy in their theories. This paper offers a more coherent view by taking insights into account that have developed over the past two decades.

After a short albeit concise discussion of some of the major theories, this paper will focus on the traditional role of the clergy in Iranian society prior to the revolution. It is argued that during the regime of the Shah many of the clerics were able to mobilize the masses because of their social position. This chapter will attempt to describe the group and their presumed ability to mobilize the masses. It will not only discuss the variety in terms of power for individual clerics, but also for example their allegiance to and opinion of the Shah. The clergy is often portrayed as a homogeneous group, a view this paper seeks to dismiss. Scholars such as Skocpol acknowledge the diversity of the clergy throughout the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, while their political opposition in reaction to the Shah’s policies is largely left unquestioned.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thirdly, this paper will discuss how the clergy got involved with politics. Traditionally much of the clergy refused to play a role in politics. Part of this chapter analyses the clergy in the preamble to revolution. It will focus on how relevant groups differed on various political matters and how Khomeini managed to get the divided clergy behind him in spite of political differences. Additionally it’ll discuss Khomeini’s rise to prominence. Describing the part that the clergy played during this phase is crucial to understand their later rise to power. With the foundations being laid down the fourth chapter of this paper discusses the rise to power of the clergy.

By discussing the various contenders with a specific zoom on the clergy this paper seeks to provide an answer to a broader question. In this particular revolution the clergy played a big role. The roles that individual actors and domestic groups play is often discussed and varies largely for each society and revolution. Using this case as an example, this study wishes to add more depth to the complexity of domestic groups in revolutions by discussing this specific group during this particular revolution.

Chapter 1: Clergy in theory

The goal of this chapter is to discuss several theories on the Iranian Revolution with regard to the clergy. This approach to theory will result in a better understanding of the major premise this paper follows. Namely that the role the clergy played during the revolution is somewhat undervalued. In addition to this, it will point out the problems that arise when discussing a complicated domestic group in revolutions. In no way is this an attempt to debate the merit of these theories as a whole, rather to show their shortcomings or strength when it comes to this topic. That being said the discussion is short and focuses solely on the role the clergy plays in the theories. The theories that will be discussed are “Rentier state and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution” by Theda Skocpol and “Iran between two revolutions” by Ervand Abrahamian.

Moving away from her structural approach, Skocpol analyses the Iranian Revolution as a revolution that is deliberately made with the help of the Shi’a clergy. “By the end of 1978, all sectors of urban Iranian society were coalescing under the rubrics of Shi’a Islam and were following the direction of a senior Shi’a cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in uncompromising opposition to the Shah and all who remained connected to him.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is clear Skocpol believes agency in the form of Shi’a Islam played an unquestionable role in the Iranian Revolution.

The Shi’a clergy, known as *ulama*, managed to develop financial autonomy over the course of the nineteenth century as landowners and as religious tax collectors. They had large followings in cities and towns and were able to mobilize large portions of the population for protests against government policies. However, during the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century, the Shah initiated land reform to disposes not just individual clerics but various religious institutions as well. Next to this, reforms in the field of education, welfare and law threatened the position of the Shi’a clergymen in their traditional social function. This in turn led to a reaction from the *ulama*, who started to develop a “politically aggressive and populist brand of Islamic traditionalism”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Through Ayatollah Khomeini’s appeal the message gradually spread throughout Iran which in turn strengthened the widespread Iranian disgust with the Shah during the mid-seventies. Skocpol describes how the networks between Shi’a clerics themselves in addition to their connection to lay people were essential in the widespread resistance to the state. It was not just a matter of organisation but also a matter of culture as Shi’a believers followed a myth in which opposition to a tyrant would mean martyrdom. This tyrant was the Shah, so unlike European crowds, the protestors would face repression time and time again whereas the army gradually became less reliable as an instrument.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Skocpol then goes on to explain how the clergy consolidated their position after the Shah’s exile. The clergy is described as a political unity that managed to be recognized as a revolutionary vanguard. The local mullahs mobilized the many illiterate Iranians to vote for parliament, while they antagonized any political opponents as Khomeini and his clerics thought of themselves as the true interpreters of Islam. Dissidents could simply be disposed of as corrupt and evil. The result was that many leading clerics had a seat in parliament. The Islamic Republic Party managed to bring possible competing centres of authority under control by not just dominating parliament but also by having clergymen lead courts.

Skocpol’s interpretation in regard to the clergy lives little room for debate as they are presented as a single united entity that managed to come into power by antagonizing those that are not clergymen. Admittedly this article was written in 1982, meaning less information on such a topic was present at the time as opposed to now. Next to this, the revolution was still going on by 1982. However, it is debated in much of the literature that there were other clergymen who in fact openly opposed Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic state. In addition to this it does not address the constitution which was adopted on October 24th 1979, this is mentioned as this constitution did not only create new institutions in which clergymen held special powers, it also forced several institutions to have a certain number of clerics in them, which obviously strengthened their position.

The second theory in this chapter is Ervand Abrahamian’s theory of uneven development. In his book “Iran between two revolutions” he analyses the Iranian society in a Neo-Marxist fashion through an increasing gap between politics and society. Social-economic opportunities had expanded at a large rate whereas the political system suffered from stagnation and underdevelopment. The political institutions were unable to withstand the social-economic developments. The ranks of the middle class and the industrial working class expanded, which led to an increased call for political participation from said groups, which the state was unable to provide them with. This, in combination with an economic crisis, ultimately led to the downfall of the regime.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Shi’a clerics, who played such an important role in Skocpol’s theory, seem to be less relevant for the theory which Abrahamian construes. It is rather strange that the theory emphasizes the process of uneven development, while plenty can be found in Abrahamian’s book on the relevance of the clergy. In his study Abrahamian originally discusses the Tudeh party but instead chose for a more complete work on the Islamic revolution. As a result much of his work emphasizes the diversity of the clergy as well as the specific role that Khomeini played as a political and religious leader. Abrahamian aptly describes the diversity of the clergy as well as the role that Khomeini plays as a populist and mobiliser. The analysis of the changing role of the clergy throughout the century is well depicted in his work.

The fashion in which Abrahamian discusses Khomeini’s skill as such shows that agency *did* play a rather important role in the revolution. In fact, Abrahamian goes on to call the role of Khomeini vital in the making of the Iranian Revolution. Surely such relevance should hold a place in theory? It is clear that much of the larger works give much attention to the clergy as it is, however they aren’t recognised as such to deserve a place in theory for some reason. Clergy as a social group are crucial to the understanding of the Iranian Revolution, when analysing a revolution, these groups shouldn’t be left out.

Chapter 2: The clergy in Iranian society and the path to revolution

Historical background

A historical background is a necessary requirement to understand the context in which a revolution happened. As this paper focusses solely on the clergy it is no more than logical that a chapter is dedicated to the introduction of this group. The clergy held a specific position in the Iranian society, which, when explained, will allow the reader to understand their later rise to power better. This chapter will discuss the traditional position of the clergy, how it changed over the course of the years as the Pahlavi regime settled in. In addition this chapter will address the diversity of Islam and the clergy in the country.

Iran is one of the few countries in the world with a large majority of Shi’ites. This branch of Islam came to be after a schism in Islam following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD. The split was triggered by a difference over leadership. Shi’ites believed he should be succeeded through blood, by a relative, whereas the group that later set out to be the Sunnites believed that a the next ruler should be chosen by the community, regardless of blood ties. That being said, Shi’ites believed his son-in-law and first cousin, Ali, should have been Mohammed’s successor. Ali became the fourth caliph for five years until he was murdered. A new dynasty came to be to rule the Islamic empire, while Ali’s son, Hussein, and his followers fought against this new dynasty even though their chances of success were slim. They’d rather die knowing that fighting for justice was better than living under injustice, which is characteristic for Shi’ite beliefs today.

The specific branch of Shi’ism to which most Iranians belong is called Twelver Shi’ism. The reason it is called Twelver Shi’ism is based on that the Twelfth Imam disappeared in 874 AD and will one day return. The day he returns he’ll restore the world to justice as he’ll return as the *Mahdi*, a messiah-like figure. It is believed that clerics can be trained in seminaries as a substitute for the Mahdi’s authority, during his absence, on certain issues. This means they hold a powerful position as they interpret the word of God for their followers. Believers are to be blindly obedient to the rulings of these clerics. Khomeini would later on use this religious power to legitimise his theocratic form of government.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Twelver Shi’ism in itself is a paradox. There is a belief in the need for divine authority, which has vanished ever since the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam in the ninth century. Over the course of history the solution came to be that clergymen trained in seminaries would serve as substitutes for the vanished Imam. However, these clergymen didn’t have the prerogative to rule. This meant the clergy authorized the state to collect taxes and such, which in practice means the clergy shared it’s power in some form of duality with lay monarchs. The authority the monarchs had was based on a customary, common-law, rather than an Islamic law.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In theory the *ulama* were the ones who held the authority whereas monarchs were seen as illegitimate rulers. In practice however, this led to the aforementioned compromise. By no means does this mean the clergy as a whole accepted state authority. Throughout time the clergy are characterized by being deeply divided over matters such as civics and it’s relation with Islam.[[8]](#footnote-8) The discussions held regarding this theme were reoccurring over the span of eleven centuries, which goes to show it was a heavily debated topic amongst clerics. From the nineteenth century onwards the clergy managed to become independent of the state. Shi’a clerics had a variety of income through religious taxes but also as legislators and educators.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Most of the clergy viewed their responsibilities as mainly apolitical. The responsibilities they had, which were known as the *layat-e faqih*, meaning the jurist’s guardianship, meant they studied the law based on three different things. The Koran, the Prophet’s traditions and the teachings of the Twelve Imams. They updated these laws through reason and were to issue statements on legal issues and such. In practice this meant that senior clerics would aid those who couldn’t look after themselves using the earlier mentioned religious tax, namely minors, widows and the insane. For some the responsibility also meant that senior clerics had the right to enter the political arena. However, this would only be temporary and only in case an incapable monarch was endangering the community as a whole.[[10]](#footnote-10) This rarely happened however and most of the clergy accepted state authority as a necessary evil, yet at the same time they realized the state served as a way to guarantee a safe and peaceful society.

Clerics have had a powerful and influential position in Iranian society throughout time, in rural as well as urban areas. The state may have gained more control over urban areas as society modernized, but the clergy still managed to be very influential in those urban areas next to the less accessible and rural areas in Iran. From time to time, leading members of the *ulama* were able to mobilize huge protests against the state which happened multiple times during the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century.[[11]](#footnote-11) Examples of this are uprisings in 1891, 1906 and 1963. Much of the literature regarding this topic explicitly emphasizes that the clergy were in no way unified, let alone united. Much of the resistance that the Shah faced from the clergy from the mid-seventies was something completely new and unseen. However, it is clear that their opposition did not mean that the clergy as a whole envisioned the future of Iran in the same way as Khomeini and his followers did.

Path to revolution

The question then remains how these mainly apolitical clergymen would eventually enter the political fray. After the 1953 coup d’état one of the primary goals of the new regime was to weaken any serious opposition they had. As it was orchestrated by the CIA and SIS one of the top priorities was to get rid of any threat the Marxist Tudeh party could pose, in addition to generally suppressing political opposition. This coup would turn Iran into an authoritarian state led by Reza Pahlavi up until 1979, as opposed to being a constitutional monarchy which it was until 1953. It is widely accepted that much of the anti-Western sentiment in Iran originated from this coup. In addition, much of the populace lost their faith in the political system because of the inability of the political opposition to act against this coup. The clergy, specifically Khomeini, would end up as the main voice of criticism against the newly settled regime.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In 1963 the Shah initiated a set of reforms which he called the White Revolution. These reforms had that name as the intention was to have a bloodless revolution, as opposed to a red one. The most important facet of these reforms was land reform. These land reforms disposed many individual clerics as well as religious institutions. The goal of the reforms was to cut the ties between the clergy and the landed upper class. Educational, welfare and legal reforms created modern, professional, state-employment competitors to the Shi’a clergy in all of their historically important social functions. Much of the religious tax would still be paid voluntarily nonetheless. The Shah believed the relevance of the clerics would soon fade in the inevitability of modernization. [[13]](#footnote-13)

After the death of the leading cleric, Seyyed Hossein Boroujerdi in 1961, Khomeini rose to prominence within the Shi’a ranks mainly due to his charisma. Boroujerdi was much more supportive of the Shah and made sure there was little conflict between the Shah and the clergy. Khomeini on the other hand chose a different approach. As he was freed from Boroujerdi’s restraint after his death he began to speak out during the early sixties of the twentieth century. Even though the main complaints of the clergy were the previously mentioned land reforms as well as women’s suffrage, he instead hammered on other issues which shows his political craftsmanship. These other issues had much more appeal on the general population. He denounced the Shah and his regime for “being corrupt, rigging elections, violating the constitutional laws, stifling the press and the political parties, destroying the independence of universities, neglecting the economic needs of merchants, workers, peasants, undermining the country’s Islamic beliefs, encouraging *gharbzadegi* – indiscriminate borrowing from the West – granting “capitulations” to foreigners, selling oil to Israel and constantly expanding the size of the central bureaucracies.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Needless to say these issues had more widespread appeal and showed Khomeini was a rival to the Shah as he was not just a religious but a political leader as well.

All of the cries Khomeini did were done during an angry speech, which resulted in his arrest. His arrest in turn resulted in riots which shocked various cities and religious centres. The riots lasted three days. After eight months of house-arrest, Khomeini continued to express criticism against the Shah, which resulted in his exile. The regime weathered the storm, but in fact these riots would end up being the dress rehearsal for the later Islamic Revolution. However, as opposed to later, the opposition leaders as well as Khomeini did not aim for radical change, rather they sought moderate reforms.[[15]](#footnote-15)

After Khomeini’s exile there were three groups within the religious establishment. These groups could be separately identified yet they were fluid and also had some sort of overlap. The religious establishment during this period has been mentioned previously in chapter one but will be repeated here as it is an excellent analysis of the difference between clerical groups during this period. The three groups during this period were the apolitical clergy, the moderate clerical opposition and the militant clerical opposition.

All three groups had frustrations with the regime for one reason or another, yet they all had a different outlook on how these problems should be solved as well. The main issues for the apolitical clergy was related to social problems. The modernisation caused an uncontrollable influx of young migrants into cities, which, in turn, resulted in a variety of problems such as prostitution, alcoholism and crime. The *ulama* were obviously shocked by these problems and believed that they were the result of moral laxity. The only way to solve these problems, they believed, were to strictly enforce religious laws.

The moderate clerical opposition more openly opposed the regime on matters such as women’s suffrage and land reform, in contrary to the apolitical clergy. They were also the largest group. However, the moderates did attempt to keep open channels of communication with the regime so that they could lobby as much as they could to protect the vital interests of the religious establishment. As stated before they hoped to establish a constitutional monarchy with a “supreme committee” of five *mujtaheds*, senior clerics, to ensure all bills passed by parliament conformed to the sharia.

The third group can be defined as militant clerical opposition. They were less moderate and headed by Khomeini. There was little reason for Khomeini to be moderate towards the government as he lived in exile. That being said, he openly criticized and denounced the Shah a number of times for a variety of reasons. This group aimed to overthrow the Pahlavi regime and establish a new form of Islamic government.

Khomeini criticized both the apolitical clergy and the moderate clerical opposition, the first for abdicating their duties as protectors of the law and the second for believing a monarchy would work. Khomeini argued that monarchy as an institution was anti-Islamic as “the Prophet had denounced hereditary kingship as satanic and pagan.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The constitution of Iran was no more than a product of imperial agents, using their own laws that were camouflaged with Islamic terms. Khomeini’s cunning was that he rarely explicitly stated his exact views, rather he tried to rally all groups of opposition behind him by focussing on the faults that the monarchy and Shah had instead of his own philosophy.

As a result Khomeini made virtually no enemies. By not explicitly mentioning his own vision and having little interaction with the media prior to his return to Iran, Khomeini succeeded in not alienating groups that could later on help him rise to power.[[17]](#footnote-17) During the mid-seventies the Shah fell out of favor completely, not with just the populace but with the two most important social groups that traditionally supported the monarchy: the middle class and the clergy.

A crackdown on the middle class as a result of an economic crisis led to various protests from 1975 onwards. As a solution to the huge inflation that the country struggled with, the regime decided to place the blame as well as the burden solely on the shoulders of the business community. The traditional middleclass, known as *bazaari* , was a mix of high income merchants as well as lower income shopkeepers. It was an economically diverse group united in its resistance against the Shah as a result of the new laws that were aimed directly at them as part of a crusade against “profiteers, cheaters, hoarders, and unscrupulous capitalists.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

These *bazaari* were a traditional ally that would turn to the *ulama* in their search for help, as each previous revolution and uprising was based on this alliance. The harassment was largely done by the SAVAK, the Iranian secret police who were trained by the CIA. It was clear this wouldn’t help the Shah’s cause and played directly into the hands of Khomeini as it clearly showed the influence foreign powers had on their country. The news of the Iranian regime invading the bazaars spread and eventually, one of Iran’s allies, the USA, pressed the Shah to do more to protect civil and political liberties. The Shah, not wanting to endanger the relationship Iran had with the USA as well as thinking of himself as a westernized modernizer, felt it was in his best interest to loosen police controls from 1977 onwards.[[19]](#footnote-19) He couldn’t of been more wrong. Protests against the Shah intensified over the course of the next year and eventually led to the Shah fleeing the country. Khomeini would return in 1979 to take charge of the gap that the Shah left.

Chapter 3: Rise to power

Using their political and religious position Khomeini and his followers managed to come into power, however it is unclear what steps they took to make sure they, the clergy, could hold on to their newly attained position. This chapter will deal with a part of the Iranian Revolution that is often neglected. This chapter analyses the period of Khomeini’s return to Iran, up until the clergy consolidated their power in 1983. This chapter will focus specifically on struggles and debates within the clergy, and how Khomeini managed to push through his vision for the future of Iran.

Khomeini enjoyed much of the popular support in the urban areas from not just the populace but the clergy as well. However, this wasn’t the case throughout Iran as a whole. Plenty of diversity was to be found. It was clear that just like other groups these clergymen joined the Khomeini movement in resistance to the Shah, but it should be mentioned that many of these clergymen weren’t necessarily part or supportive of Khomeini’s movement.[[20]](#footnote-20)

As a result of the disintegration of the state much of the power was decentralized by default and instead power came to local organizations that were led by local clergymen. These *Komitehs*, committees if you will, were predominantly headed by local clergymen loyal to Khomeini. These clergymen were in turn helped by a diversity of people, wealthy *bazaari* merchants, local shopkeepers, teachers and lesser clergymen all helped for the sake of redistributing food and policing the streets. This meant these committees were the de facto rulers of, sometimes, entire cities. Some of these committees were in areas that were Sunni or spoke a different language, these groups demanded not an Islamic Republic but a democratic Islamic Republic.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As the fighting ended and Khomeini was seen as the unquestionable political and religious leader of the country, a referendum was held. The question was if the monarchy should be abolished for a new Islamic state. The outcome was that the population overwhelmingly approved (98,2% in favor) of the creation of an Islamic Republic. As the revolution came to an end, Khomeini’s followers increasingly managed the day to day business of the country and eventually aimed to institutionalize Khomeini’s doctrine.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Much has been written on the political thought of Khomeini. This paper is too short to appropriately address such a theme, however, it is in turn a necessity to understand Khomeini’s actions. Khomeini believed that during the Twelfth Imam’s absence the *ulama* were to have absolute rule over the believers. The responsibilities, which were usually limited to authority in the field of jurisprudence and spiritual matters, should be expanded to absolute authority over political, economic and social matters.[[23]](#footnote-23) That being said he envisioned a state in which clerics would play an important role. This was a complete break from the classical Shi’a approach which refuted clergy entering the political arena. Khomeini legitimized this new position of the clergy by stating that instead of waiting for the Twelfth Imam to return, it was up the clergy and the believers to create a state that was perfect in an Islamic sense. The classic approach was that the *Mahdi* would return during a period of great injustice and tyranny. Khomeini argued that he would reappear when Muslims returned to Islam and created a just society.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In practice Khomeini’s views meant the following. The constitution itself would be a hybrid between the constitution from the Constitutional Revolutions of 1905 and the Fifth Republic of France. However, several changes would secure it’s Islamic character. All laws that were passed through parliament would have to be legalized by a Council of Guardians that would test the laws based on its Islamic virtue; whether it was in accordance with the sharia, Quran and the traditions. The juristic supervision was to be provided by this council, which would consist of six qualified jurists and six lawyers. In addition, the state was to be headed by a supreme leader, who was chosen by an Assembly of Experts.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, Khomeini was very careful to mention his exact vision of the state. Even though he wrote a book on this state, most of the opposition didn’t read this as it was mainly known in religious seminaries.

After the Shah’s departure, a provisional government was formed. This government was to be led by a moderate lay intellectual, Mehdi Bazargan. Bazargan was appointed by the Council of the Islamic Revolution, which was headed by Khomeini. After Bazargan’s resignation due to the hostage crisis that started in 1979. The Council then held the power until the election of a new parliament. Khomeini believed in a step-by-step policy to secure the power for the clergy. If the clerics took the power early the people would assume it was their goal all along.[[26]](#footnote-26) The council consisted of seven religious figures, seven secular opposition figures and two representatives of the security forces. The seven secular opposition figures left to form a cabinet, led by Bazargan. However, some of the clerics in the Council had their differences with Bazargan as they were excluded from the cabinet. For that reason they decided to found the Islamic Republican Party. The IRP would end up playing a decisive role in securing the power for the more radical clergy.[[27]](#footnote-27)

After the successful referendum in which the monarchy was abolished, a constitution was drafted within a span of three months which would create a strong presidency based on the design of the Fifth Republic of France. A Council of Guardians was to be included to make sure legislation was conform to the sharia. Khomeini wanted to submit the draft as quickly as possible for a referendum in order to maintain the unity in the country. However, the moderate laity opposition objected and believed that the constitution was to be fully reviewed, without realizing that the radical Islamists had the same intensions.[[28]](#footnote-28)

A newly elected Assembly of Experts was to examine and revise the constitution where they ought necessary. This served as a unique opportunity for the recently formed IRP. The more radical elements close to Khomeini convinced him that instead of a 350-member Constituent Assembly there was to be a 40-member Assembly of Experts. Many disagreed and Khomeini eventually compromised to a 73-man Assembly of Experts. The elections that were then held were successfully dominated by the IRP. Khomeini urged the various parties to form coalitions, which the IRP did and resulted in them successfully becoming the largest Islamic party. As the IRP had much influence in the earlier mentioned committees, they sought to dominate the elections by overshadowing smaller and less established parties.

The turnout was exceptionally low, but even so the IRP came out victorious, claiming 55 out of the 73 possible seats. All 55 that were elected out of the IRP coalition were in fact clerics. As they had the chance to fully review the constitution they’d prove to be a challenge to the Bazargan administration. They simply overshadowed Bazargan’s position as a compromising, lay moderate. IRP supporters successfully led purges throughout the country to make sure the bureaucracy and military were filled with clergy sympathizers.[[29]](#footnote-29) The IRP served as a vanguard to make sure their ideals were carried out.

The new constitution, which was adopted in late 1979, held that Khomeini from then on was the Supreme Leader, or Supreme Religious Jurist. This concept of *velayat-e faqih*, which means as much as guardianship of protection, meant that this position had the authority to dismiss the president, appoint the main military commanders, declare war and peace, and name senior clerics to the Guardian Council, whose main responsibility was to make sure that all laws passed by parliament conformed to the sharia, Quran and the traditions. If Khomeini were to pass and no supreme religious judge emerged after Khomeini, the leadership would instead be passed on to a committee of three or five senior clerics, chosen from the Assembly of Experts.[[30]](#footnote-30)

All of this did not happen without protest from other clergymen who didn’t believe Khomeini’s new system was valid. By the end of 1979 there were serious clashes between the followers of Khomeini and those of dissident clerics in the city of Tabriz, however, most of the opposition came to an end in September 1982.[[31]](#footnote-31) Over the course of the early eighties of the twentieth century, Khomeini and his followers secured absolute authority in a step by step fashion for the clergy. in 1980 Khomeini still claimed that those who run a state shouldn’t be clerics, while the opposite seemed part of his politics. In 1980 the first president of Iran was elected, only to be impeached later by Khomeini in 1981 as he fell out of grace. The reason for this was that the Khomeini initiated a “cultural revolution” which was little more than a pure of western elements in universities. In addition, the IPR continued to purge non-Islamist sympathizers from the state. By late June in 1981, Iran no longer had a president. This went along with banning all political parties other than the Islamic Republic Party. The parliament was elected in 1980, in which the IPR already had a majority.[[32]](#footnote-32) However, the clergy didn’t achieve full authority just yet as assassinations, bombings and violence still threatened safety.

In 1982, over a 1000 people were arrested as they were accused of plotting to assassinate Khomeini. The proclaimed leader of this group, a former foreign minister, confessed on national television. Using this opportunity, various clerics who advised things such as separating mosque and state, against the will of Khomeini, were stripped of their religious rank. By 1983, the IRP and Khomeini successfully secured the power, having purged the state and making sure they could stay in power.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to discuss and analyze a domestic group during a particular revolution. Two of the dominant theories on the Iranian Revolution have discussed the role of the Shi’a clergy and how they came to power, however, little has been written on their actual consolidation from 1979 onwards. The clergy came to power due to a variety of factors. As a traditional social force in Iran they held a powerful position in society. This paper has thoroughly described and analyzed their position in society. It is clear that in order to come to power, their traditional position was of much importance. The fact they were always able to mobilize much of the populace when their interests were thwarted, in addition to followers still paying religious taxes in spite of the government abolishing them, goes to show how influential they were throughout time. Their popularity amongst the influential *bazaari* was key to their later rise to power.

It has also become clear that the position of the clergy is diverse and that they are in no way united along a hierarchy, let alone in political opinion. In spite of the majority of the clergy being apolitical, they were forced to act to protect their position by the policies of Reza Pahlavi during the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. As history showed they acted when their position was in danger, as was the case when the Shah attempted to introduce a set of reforms known as the White Revolution.

The clergy were mainly apolitical and if they were engaged they were mostly moderate. This changed with the death of the leading cleric in 1961, which paved the way for Rurollah Khomeini to rise to prominence. As he was no longer restrained by senior clerics he criticized the regime for a variety of things. Hammering on themes that caused discontent amongst all ranks of Iranian society, he managed to gain popular support. As he was exiled from the country his popularity only further increased. This, in combination with his political cunning of a more or less populist approach, hammering on fault rather than seeking compromise or propagating an own vision, resulted in a broad acceptance of Khomeini as a political and religious leader, allowing him to take charge when he returned to Iran in 1979 after the Shah’s departure.

Through theory he legitimized the possibility of an Islamic republic as well as clergy actively participating in politics. Designing various institutions that are part of his political theory made sure that Khomeini successfully ensured cleric dominance in the Islamic state. In spite of the constitution originally having the model of the Fifth French Republic, interference by the Islamic Republican Party made sure that the clergy, together with Khomeini, held much of the power.

The role that the IRP played is not to be underestimated in the clergy’s rise to power. The IRP used their influence throughout the country to secure positions in crucial institutions that could further secure their power. They played the role of vanguard party by organizing things from the ground up in the form of committees which would later on ensure the dominant victories the IRP saw in various elections. Contenders and dissidents within the clergy were effectively taken care of through multiple purges, stripping them from their titles and political exclusion.

In sum the clergy’s rise to power during the early eighties of the twentieth century is explained through a variety of factors. Some of them were long-term such as their position in society, however, the majority of them were short-term factors. If it wasn’t for the Shah attempting to push through policy that threatened their position it would of been likely that the clergy would have been more passive. In addition to this, Khomeini’s cunning and popularity plays an undisputable role in the clergy’s rise to power. His position as Supreme Leader was backed up by the IRP, who as a vanguard, guarded the revolution and made sure the radical clergy came to power during the Islamic Revolution.

The role that Khomeini played as a leader and the IRP as a vanguard is comparable to that of the Bolsheviks and Lenin in Russia. It has become clear that the role Shi’a Islam played as well as the clergy is a difficult one and not easily portrayed. It was a small group of revolutionaries who, through their popularity and organizational skills, managed to effectively control the new Islamic Republic. The clergy may have engaged more and more in politics, but only the radicals under Khomeini ended up condoning and ruling this new state.

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