

THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE PAHLAVI REGIME AND THE CLERGY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IN THE 20th CENTURY

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Abstract

This work analyzes the intensification of the conflict between the Pahlavi regime and the clergy in 20th-century Iran, examining its causes and stages. The main focus is on the Shah's policies of secularization and Westernization, the socio-political status of religious scholars, and the activities of leaders such as Ruhollah Khomeini. The study highlights key events, including the 1906 Constitution, the "White Revolution," the introduction of a secular judiciary, and the restriction of clerical rights. As a result, the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic based on religious governance, emphasizing the decisive role of Shi'a clerics. In conclusion, the text underscores the radical transformation of Iran's state system, the consolidation of Shi'ism as the official religion, and the full integration of Islamic values into the country's public life.

Keywords

Shi'ism, Safavid, Qajars, Pahlavi dynasty, Mohammad Reza Shah, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, John F. Kennedy, Sepahsalar, Isna'ashariya, Islamic Republic.

Introduction

Historically, the *Shi'a* branch was widely spread in northern Iraq and Iran. However, during the Abbasid rule (750–1258), *Shi'ism* failed to establish itself in Iraqi political life. In contrast, in Iran over several centuries the socio-political status of *Shi'a* religious scholars strengthened, leading to the development of the doctrine of *Imamate*, which asserted the inseparability of religious and secular authority, and of religion and state. Some *Shi'a* scholars, based on the central tenet of the "Hidden Imam," argued that secular governance was permissible until the return of the

Twelfth Imam, although they considered such rule illegitimate without the Hidden Imam's permission (Bartold, 1966:174).

In the early 16th century, as the Safavid state (1502–1736) was forming, *Shi'ism* was established as the state religion of Iran. The founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail, and his associates legitimized their rule by claiming descent from the seventh *Shi'a* Imam (Musa al-Kazim ibn Ja'far as-Sadiq) and declared themselves deputies of the Hidden Imam. During this period, not all religious scholars accepted the Sassanian-era idea that "the Shah is the shadow of God on earth" (Tokhtiev, 2025:65–72).

Under Safavid rule, *Shi'a* clerics were subordinate to the Shahs and maintained a compromise with state power. They became one of the most influential groups, displacing Sunni religious figures, and gained extensive rights in judicial punishment, education, and religious ceremonies. Gradually, through large land grants from the court and wealthy merchants, the clergy became major landowners. Lands gifted to religious institutions (*waqf*) were exempt from state taxation. Two *sadrs* (high-ranking clerics) led the clergy, appointed by the Shah from among the most respected *sayyids*. All lands were divided into *khasse* (royal lands) and *ommi* (including *waqf* lands), with one *sadr* managing each (Doroshenko, 1985:39).

As Safavid power waned, the influence of senior *Shi'a* figures grew. The prominent theologian Mulla-Bashi Muhammad Baqir Majlisi led the entire *Shi'a* clergy, to whom scholars, *mujtahids*, and *shaykh al-islams* submitted. The position of *sadr* was abolished (Pigulevskaya et al., 1958:293).

During the 18th–19th centuries, under various dynasties – most notably the Qajars (1736–1925) – there was constant and prolonged struggle between the Shahs and the senior *Shi'a* clergy. Qajar Shahs, calling themselves "the shadow of God on earth," sought theocratic rule, but the clergy and *mujtahids* insisted that even Shahs must follow them as adherents (*muqallids*).

Main Part

The 1905–1911 revolution transformed Iran into a constitutional monarchy. The constitution declared Twelver *Shi'ism* (*Isna'ashariya*) as the official religion and required all laws to conform to religious law. The Shah had to swear an oath before parliament: "I swear by all that is sacred in the presence of Almighty God... I will devote all my efforts to promoting the teachings of the Twelve Imams..."

During the first session of the Iranian parliament, efforts were made to define the role of Muslim clerics in the new socio-political system. The constitution allowed clerics to participate in elections and send representatives to parliament. An additional Article 2 mandated that a committee of five Islamic scholars or senior

religious figures review all laws; if a law contradicted Islamic tenets, they could veto it. This article could not be changed until the return of the Hidden Imam (Konstitutsii gosudarstv, 1956:102).

The 1906 constitution played a positive role in Iran's future history: it limited the Shah's absolute power and, in some areas, strengthened clerical influence. However, laws were passed restricting clerical authority in education and the judiciary. The Ministry of Education took control of *waqf* management. Until the mid-1920s, all non-political court cases were judged according to *Sharia*. Sharia courts operated alongside ordinary and royal courts, handling cases like rebellion, armed attack, and treason. Their rulings required approval by central and local government authorities, which caused serious discontent among senior clerics (Doroshenko, 1985:41).

In 1925, with Reza Khan's rise to power (1925–1941), a significant blow was dealt to the clergy. The Constituent Assembly amended Articles 36–40 of Iran's Basic Law. Article 36 declared Reza Shah as the founder of the new Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1978), with succession passing to his eldest son. From then on, neither Reza Shah nor his son and successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, ever discussed forming a constitutional committee of five respected clerics. Occasionally, however, they consulted senior clerics on issues such as Quran teaching in secular schools, relations with Muslim states, and the status of senior Shi'a representatives in Iraq's holy centers (Tehran Mosavar, 1960).

In the 1920s–30s, Iran introduced a secular court system. The *Shi'a* clergy lost their monopoly over the judiciary, and courts began serving ruling-class interests. The Majlis established a Sharia department within the Ministry of Justice (Milanyan, 1973:108). In major cities and provinces, civil courts included one or two respected clerics to review cases referred by the Sharia department. Their decisions were subject to state control and could be overruled by government authorities. Over two decades, civil and criminal codes were adopted; judicial bodies were restructured and integrated into the state apparatus; clerical rights were curtailed.

Although Sharia courts were limited by new laws in the 1920s–30s, they were not abolished but classified as special courts (Doroshenko, 1985:53). These courts consisted of one judge-*mujtahid* appointed by the Ministry of Justice. In places with Sharia courts, local city *mujtahids* served as judges (*qadis*) (Milanyan, 1973:114–115). The Tehran Sharia court – comprising a *shaykh al-islam* and two judges – was appointed by the Ministry with the Shah's approval and acted as the supreme court for all Sharia courts nationwide.

The Shah and government sought to satisfy Iran's middle class, as such families preferred Sharia courts for matters like divorce and inheritance. The duties

of Sharia courts were defined by the Ministry of Justice; they handled religiously-related cases. Iranians wishing their case heard in a Sharia court first had to obtain permission from secular courts or prosecutors.

Faced with inevitable secular government interference, some *Shi'a* thinkers agreed to preserve their influence over believers by preventing total state control over "religious spheres" – that is, the application of "divine law" to contemporary life. As a result, several *Shi'a* theological societies were formed – for example, in the 1960s, under Ayatollah Murtaza Motahhari at Tehran University's Sepahsalar Seminary, the Islamic Religious Society (*Anjoman-e Dini*) was established (Doroshenko, 1985:132).

Most *Shi'a* clerics consistently supported the inseparability of religious and secular authority, though they differed on how to realize this idea. In the 1960s–70s, *Shi'a* scholars could be divided into traditionalists, fundamentalists, and modernists. All believed that ultimate responsibility for the state rested with the clergy.

The first to openly speak of uniting Islam and politics in Iran was Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (1900–1989). This idea emerged after his teacher Khaeri Yazdi's death, when Khomeini became head of the philosophy department at Fayziya Seminary in Qom (Mironov & Turadjev, 2000:26).

A key aspect of Imam Khomeini was his creativity in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), opening the doors to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) and issuing legal rulings (*fatwa*). This greatly enhanced his authority. His religious and political activities intensified. In 1961, he received the title "Ayatollah al-Uzma" (Grand Ayatollah), becoming one of Iran's leading *Shi'a* figures (Lider islamskoy revolyutsii, 2000:13).

Khomeini's major political activity began in 1962, when Prime Minister Amir Asadollah Alam approved a law on regional and local societies requiring members to be elected from secular organizations – seen as an attempt to remove Islam from public life (Russko-uzbekskiy slovar, 1954:774). Leading learned clerics, guided by Khomeini, launched a broad campaign against this law; public pressure forced the Prime Minister to withdraw it after two months (Lider islamskoy revolyutsii, 2000:13).

During President John F. Kennedy's term (1961–63), the U.S., countering communist influence in the "Third World," promoted top-down reform ("revolution from above"). Kennedy personally advised Mohammad Reza Shah to implement reforms – laying groundwork for the Shah's future "White Revolution." On January 8, 1963, six reform principles were announced for a national referendum. Khomeini and Qom's religious leaders demanded more information; unsatisfied with official responses – and seeing these reforms as cosmetic measures to

preserve power and serve American interests – Khomeini sharply criticized them (Mironov & Turadjev, 2000:26).

In June 1963, addressing students and teachers at Qom's seminary, Khomeini denounced the Shah's rule as illegitimate and blamed him for all national woes, even comparing him to Yazid (the Umayyad caliph who killed Imam Hussein). Khomeini and other prominent clerics were arrested; protests erupted in Qom and other cities. The government responded harshly; these events are seen as marking the start of the Islamic Revolution.

Two months later, Khomeini was released but continued open opposition. In November 1964, he was exiled to Turkey; in 1965 he moved to Iraq's holy city Najaf, where he lived for 14 years. There he wrote his famous work *Islamic Government*, denouncing monarchy and hereditary rule as contrary to Islam. By 1978, Khomeini called on Iranians to take to the streets and overthrow the Shah. The people responded; protests began in Qom and spread nationwide – to Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Tehran (Mironov & Turadjev, 2000:26–28; Tokhtiev, 2024).

Conclusion

The revolutionary wave intensified; from exile, Khomeini sent directives home. Ultimately, mass unrest forced the Shah to flee. This allowed Khomeini's return: on January 31, 1979, after years in exile, he returned to Iran with supporters. His arrival decisively shifted events: within ten days, on February 11, 1979, all remnants of Pahlavi rule collapsed; revolutionary forces seized power.

The 1978–79 Iranian Revolution transformed Iran's governance: Shi'a clerics became rulers. In late March 1979, a national referendum confirmed that most Iranians supported establishing an Islamic Republic; on April 1, 1979, it was officially proclaimed.

Throughout Iranian history, religion and clerics maintained influence despite changing regimes. By 1978–79 their sway over society peaked; they led the overthrow of the monarchy and established a religiously-based Islamic Republic. As a result: Iran's state system radically changed; Shi'a clerics assumed leadership; Twelver Shi'ism became official doctrine; its principles are now fully implemented in state life.

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