



Why was there a revolution in Iran in 1979?

This is a transcript of the [Why was there a revolution in Iran in 1979?](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

Today, Iran is vastly different to how it was in 1979. Iran is now a theocracy – a country ruled by religious leaders – which could suggest that the revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power was a conservative religious backlash against the ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. However, as with most things in history, it's not quite that simple. Whether you are explaining why the revolution occurred, or judging how far a particular reason was responsible, you need to be able to give examples of a range of different factors. This podcast aims to give examples of a range of different factors that contributed to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 including the effect of anti-Western feeling, widespread social and economic inequality, and the impact of Ayatollah Khomeini.

By the middle of the 20th century, Iran was a country that enjoyed immense wealth built on an abundant supply of oil even though the vast majority of the population continued to live in poverty. Iran's ruler, Mohamed Reza Shah Pahlavi, had come to power in 1941 after his father was removed from power by a combined force of British and Russian troops and maintained a close relationship with the Western powers including the USA. This relationship was severely tested when, in 1951, his Prime Minister Mohammad Mussadiq nationalised the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company that had controlled the oil fields. The move proved hugely popular with ordinary Iranians, but caused enormous problems with the Western powers who now refused to buy Iran's oil since they were no longer in control of it. This response led the Shah to plot remove Mussadiq, using the expertise of the American CIA and the British MI6. Although the coup restored relations with the West and led to Iran growing very rich from the oil industry, many Iranians saw the move as a betrayal of Iranian sovereignty and as pandering to the Western powers. This feeling was reinforced when, in 1956, the Shah joined an anti-Soviet (and therefore anti-Communist) alliance. The USA had signed a treaty with Iran the previous year, and it was now clear that Iran was taking sides in the Cold War. The Shah's close relationship with the West was therefore one of the long-term factors that caused the Revolution of 1979, because many in the country felt that he was betraying Iran.

To try to win support, the Shah used the income from the new National Iranian Oil Company to modernise Iran. He began to introduce a series of reforms known as the 'White Revolution' from 1962 onwards, in an attempt to improve the social and economic situation for most Iranians. For example land reforms allowed peasants to purchase land; women were given the right to vote; the Literacy Corps was introduced to teach people in the rural areas how to read and write. However, such policies were interpreted by some as the effect of the Shah's close relationship with the West. Iran was also becoming a huge market for



American grain and meat, which often meant that local farmers were put out of business. As a result many young people moved to the cities to look for work, but found that there weren't enough jobs. Furthermore, industrial reforms meant that foreign investment was ploughed in to creating modern factories that put smaller producers and local shops out of business. To many people in Iran, it seemed as though the Shah was changing Iran for the worse by introducing ideas that went against Iranian tradition and that were not for the benefit of the people.

The Shah himself was aware of the opposition he faced. He had only managed to remove Mossadeq with the help of foreign intervention, but had become the target of a number of assassination attempts. To protect himself, he would often ignore the constitution and introduce policies that further alienated him from the people. In 1957, for example, he established his own secret police called the SAVAK. Their methods were brutal, using torture and execution to intimidate and silence political opponents that led to the people of Iran living in constant fear. Consequently the opposition were silenced, although a growing number of Iranians were turning against the Shah.

Despite the ban on political parties in Iran, the opposition was able to find a leader in the Muslim scholar, Ayatollah Khomeini. Muslim religious leaders, known as mullahs, used the mosques and weekly Friday prayers to speak out against the Shah's regime. They criticised the Shah's support of the state of Israel, and encouraged attacks on cinemas that showed foreign, often sexualised, films that were felt to be un-Islamic. In particular they criticised the wealth and luxury of his lifestyle, in a country where many people struggled to afford to eat. The enormous gap between the rich and poor was demonstrated when Shah held a huge three-day party to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire in October 1971. Officially, the Shah claimed the event cost \$40 million but it's likely that the real cost was well over \$100 million. As American journalist Robin B. Wright said in 2000, "As the foreigners revelled on drink forbidden by Islam, Iranians were not only excluded from the festivities, some were starving."

By this point, Ayatollah Khomeini had already been criticising the Shah's "Western decadence" at the cost of Iran's Islamic heritage for a decade. In 1964 this led to him being forced into exile in France, from where he continued to speak out against the Shah's government. His speeches were recorded onto cassette tapes and smuggled into Iran, where they were copied and distributed. Just like Twitter or Facebook, these cassettes helped Khomeini to broadcast his message to people even though he wasn't there in person. As a religious cleric, he automatically received a lot of respect from religious Iranians, and his simple language appealed to the people who were poor or unemployed. Due to his sizeable following, many members of the opposition recognised that Khomeini was best positioned to lead the movement against the Shah. He played down his desire to establish an Islamic



government in Iran, concentrating instead on working with the different opposition groups to overthrow the Shah.

By 1978, the Shah's various opponents had begun to publicly demonstrate against the Shah, and the situation in the capital city of Tehran became increasingly volatile. When, on September 8th 1978, the Shah imposed martial law –that's military rule – the opposition responded with a huge protest in the city's Jaleh Square. More than 500 people were killed by soldiers, in what became known as 'Black Friday'. Although the Shah condemned the killings, Black Friday led to even more demonstrations with people calling for the death of the Shah. He attempted to calm the people by giving more political freedoms and releasing political prisoners. This had no effect on the people, who continued to call for the removal of the Shah, along with an increasing number of soldiers who sympathised with the protesters. On December 11, 1978, another huge demonstration called for Ayatollah Khomeini to return to Iran and lead the revolution. Recognising that his overthrow was becoming inevitable, the Shah and his wife left Iran on January 16, 1979 to receive treatment for cancer. They never returned.

Left in charge of the crumbling regime, the Shah's last Prime Minister attempt to block Khomeini from returning by closing the main airport. Despite this, Khomeini left France on a specially chartered flight and landed in Iran on February 1, 1979, with a coalition of Khomeini and other opposition leaders taking power ten days later on February 11.

Khomeini's supporters went on to dominate the new government. Here, they purged Iran of perceived un-Islamic influences and introduced laws based on the Holy Quran. As well as becoming an Islamic theocracy, Iran became more and more anti-Western, and particularly anti-American. In November 1979 students stormed that American embassy in Tehran in protest at America allowing the Shah into the country for medical treatment.

However, it's important to remember that the Iranian Revolution itself was more than a religious uprising. It's true that Ayatollah Khomeini was the leading opposition personality during the final months of the Shah's rule, but he was not the only cause. Long-term dissatisfaction with the Shah's government and his handling of the economic and social problems in Iran had led to enormous discontent, which was amplified by a widespread anti-Western attitude as a result of the Shah's close relationship with Britain and the USA. You need to be able to give examples of each of these in order to explain why there was a revolution in Iran in 1979.