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**SOCIO-POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC OF IRAN : SOME EXTERNAL RAMIFICATIONS.**

Despite the fact that Iran never came under direct imperialist yoke, the colonial penetration into its socio-cultural and politico-economic life could not be escaped. Like most of the states in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it has to operate under the imperialist world order which was characterized by the politico-economic supremacy of the West. The history of Iran for more than a century has been marked by the people's quest and struggle for the liberation from this colonial order and the establishment of a system in which they would gain sovereignty in the politico-economic management of their country.

The tobacco protest of 1891, the constitutional uprising of 1906, rise and fall of Mossadegh in early fifties and the people uprising of 1953 were all the manifestations of the Iranian people's dissatisfaction with existing dictatorial monarchical regimes that were aligned with and dependent on the imperialist powers and reflected their quest for liberation from such order.[1]

However, this dependent dictatorial order was typified and perfected during the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and it was nature and working of this regime that subsequently shaped the movement for the revolution in 1978-79. In order to appreciate the nature of post-revolution Iran's socio-economic and political system that it replaced Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign in Iran can be broadly divided into two phases.

During the first phase of his rule, 1941 to 1953, he had only limited say in the running of the government. He ascended the peacock throne only at the age of 21, in 1941 after the forced abdication of his father Reza Shah. It was due to political inexperience, shortcoming of his personality, foreign presence in the country and the changed popular mood that he could not effectively impose himself over the system. During this period Iran witnessed a defacto implementation of 1906 constitution and the monarchical authority remained limited [2]. The rift between his imperial majesty and the premier Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh in early fifties marked the end of this period. Mossadegh had symbolized the will of the Iranian people to regain political and economic sovereignty within and in relation to the world outside. It was the development of the time which helped Mossadegh to consolidate his power and compelled Shah to a

retreat and leave Iran for a self imposed exile. This was the end of Iran's twelve year experiment with the limited monarchy.

But the story of the monarchical rule did not end here. On the contrary, it marked the beginning of a new era of monarchical dictatorship with greater imperialist dependence. In fact, as it was proved by latter development the Shah's brief and self imposed exile had certain strategic objectives [3]. The Shah, it seems, was determined to rule Iran at any cost. In this regard, the united states and its western allies who had been hurt by Mossadig's nationalist policies, developed a vested interest in the preservation of the pro-west Shah. So, they came to his rescue. And it was ultimately the CIA engineered coup that overthrew Mossadig on 19 August 1953 and installed the Shah back to his throne[4]. His restoration also marked the beginning of a new era of interdependence of the Shah and the west on each other. Hence forth, for the Shah the west was important in order to safeguard his own throne and power and for the west the Shah becomes necessary for safeguarding its vital interests within Iran and outside in the region[5].

In addition, the twelve year experiment which ended with a "*brief but humiliating flight from his country*" had a great impact on the psychic make-up of the Shah. He became

suspicious and contemptuous towards all sorts of real or imaginary opposition. Therefore, immediately after his reinstallation in 1953. He subordinated every aspect of the system to his person and reversed the entire 12 years experiment of limited monarchy. Now, sustenance of power and regime security became primary objective of his rule. It was under this strategy and became of his sense of insecurity that all legal and constitutional freedoms were abrogated and within a few months the main centres of opposition had been crushed [6] and the monarchy became Iran's only institution around which all the powers revolved without any checks and balances[7]. Thus the Iranian political system became highly personalized after his re-installation in 1953. These characteristics of Iranian political system in post-1953 era have played a vital role in shaping the nature of economic management in Iran since that period . The political and economic systems are always.

So interlocked that the two in no circumstances can avoid to be influenced by each other and act independently .As a logical sequel the highly personalized political system that evolved under Mohammad Reza Shah since 1953, with its closer links with world capitalist -cum-imperialist net work created impediments in the way of overall, balanced and independent economic development of that country. These

constraints occur mainly due to the following characteristics of such a system.

1. A personalized system, especially when devoid of any viable popular base (as was the case in Iran) has to be primarily concerned with the security of the regime. Therefore , all the programmes of economic development launched under such a system, have to be subservient to the basic security requirements . Therefore, economic planning tends to be distorted.
2. The distortion is reinforced by the fact that under such a system, there is a tendency to raise the ruler to a supreme staus, it is his will rather than the opinion of experts in the field that ultimately prevails.
3. Under the leadership of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran due to its wed-lock with the United States, got entrapped into and became increasingly dependent on world capitalist-cum-imperialist network. Under this subservient relationship, a particular country does not function as a self oriented, self-sufficient and self-reliant economic unit. On the contrary, the country concerned works as a part of the larger system and therefore, losses sight of its own potentials and priorities. That is why, industrialization in Iran was selective and that fact contributed to its increasing dependence on the outside world. Therefore , instead of leading to overall economic

development all these factors contributed to serious economic distortions in Iran. External - oriented dependent industrialization with little regard for local potentials and requirements was being attempted at the cost of Iran's indigenous and traditional small scale industries. Big joint ventures , foreign as well as local, in large industries were invited and encouraged, while small scale native industry, starving for funds and facing tough competition , was on the verge of collapse. Too much of spending in a very short period spiraled the rate of inflation .Increased cost of imported expertise, imported machinery and raw materials, delays in their transportation and the low rate of production not only added to the various infrastructural shortcomings , they also contributed to heavy increase in the production cost per unit in the factories[8].

Thus, this patten of import-substituted industrialization introduced in Iran not only presented a seriously distorted way of development, high social cost, unemployment, under-employment of resources, inequitable distribution of incomes and wealth, relatively neglected agricultural and craft sector but also involved the problem of environmental pollution and the dangers of building over capacity in certain relatively less important sectors at the cost of the vital ones[9]. Due to reckless planning and spending, the unprecedented rain of

petrodollars began to evaporate soon and by the end of 1976, Iran turned up as a major borrower on the international money market. So, the view that Iran reached a high economic growth under the Shah was based on the superficial view of economic realities.

Actually, the nature of 1978-79 movement was largely determined by the circumstances that prevailed in Iran from 1953 particularly between 1963 and 1978. The legacy of the 1963 crisis has a crucial bearing on the formation of the movement of 1978-79. The development since then played a vital role in generating and shaping of the movement . While at the superficial level in 1963 it seemed that the Shah had succeeded in crushing the opposition and stabilizing his own position in reality no force could eradicate the long cherished popular aspirations for freedom. The events of 1978-79 proved that in the process of consolidation of his power by undemocratic and coercive means the Shah had actually sowed the seeds of his own destruction.

One of the striking features of post -1963 crisis era had been that the Shah did not allow any form of dissent to be expressed in Iran. The press freedom was curtailed and there was no freedom of expression , association or any other political activity lift in Iran. No political party other than the official or officially blessed ones was allowed to function in Iran.

Above all no secular platform or via media for the expression of popular opinion and healthy criticism was left open. So, under this closed system and the situation of mass strangulation created by the omnipresence of the SAVAK agents in all spheres of life, the entire political culture was bound to get spoiled in Iran[10]. That is why after the 1863 crisis independent political parties with secular and liberal orientation lost contact with the people and by and large were disintegrated[11] . It is mainly due to these factors that in contrast to their role in earlier movements, the secular forces, in spite of their active participation, has to play a role subservient to that of the clergy in the spontaneous mass movement of 1978-79. The clergy took the leading role mainly because, in the absence of any other medium, they Form pulpit of 80,000/- mosques under their control voiced popular grievances and dissent. Thus, contact with masses could be maintained, campaign against the regime could be sustained and mobilization of the masses could be kept going. Especially after the re-emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini and under his charismatic leadership the clergy became committed to the rejection of the despotic system of the Shah with all its attributes. Thus, the disintegration and decline of the secular opposition and emergence of the clergy as a dominant political force in Iran marked the subservience of the reconciliatory

liberal politics of the National Front (the leading politics party of fifties and early sixties) to the rejectionist and revolutionary politics of clergy and led by Ayatollah Khomeini, with little socio-psychological links/ contacts with the westernized imperialist ethos and value system.

All attempts of the Shah to overcome the challenge of the clergy proved futile. He failed to change the religious orientation of the people by launching a counter ideological campaign in nationalist terms . on the contrary the entire process of underplaying Islam and corrupting public morality offended the deep rooted religious sentiments of the overwhelming majority of Iranians. Thus, it added to the mass anger that had been generated by governmental coercion, economic difficulties and burdens, foreign influence and dislocation of the social life in Iran. As a result of all these factors the situation was so ripe at the end of 1977 that on just a little provocation the entire accumulated discontent was charged and a revolutionary movement was generated with some outstanding characteristics.

In terms of mass mobilization , mass involvement radicalness of the demand and the actual achievements, the 1978-79 movement proved of far greater importance and impact than all the upheavals of the present or past century Iran. On several occasions during the course of this

movement, more than two million people came out on streets and participated in the demonstrations - " the largest unofficial demonstrations in human history " . In the process of their heroic struggle thousands of people died but the movement did not wane. Popular determination testified that the masses could be killed and physically destroyed but their spirit could not be defeated . Mass mobilization in this movement in fact " must rank amongst the most epic chapters of the international revolutionary movement in this century".[12]

In this movement the alliance pattern of earlier movements was by and large , retained . Bazar merchants, students, middle classes and even the working class fought untidily under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Under his leadership the movement got committed to the total rejection of the entire system leaving no room for a compromise solution. That is why neither marital law nor the concessions belatedly granted by the government could silence the opposition and resolve the crisis. On the contrary unconcerned with the alternately changing carrot and stick policy of the Shah, the movement grew more and more determined and rigid with the passage of time. And ultimately , the compromise framework of Shahpour Bakhtiar and his strategy of managing a peaceful transition to a democratic government failed. Under the unabated popular pressure the

Shah of Iran had to vacate his country on February, 5 1979 and with his flight the state apparatus in Iran built around his person with all its attributes collapsed completely.

It marked the end of 2500 year old monarchy. Subsequently, the mandate of the overwhelming majority of the people for the creation of an Islamic Republic, in essence, invalidated the decades old political set up of Iran. Later on , a new constitution was drafted and adopted . These drastic changes contributed to certain basic shifts in the ideological foundation, political orientation , national interest perceptions foreign policy directions and above all to the basic power structure of the Iranian state. These changes significantly also marked its fundamental break from the world order that was characterized by socio-political hegemony and political economic dominance by external powers.

All revolutions are brought about by a coalition of social forces , classes and groups . in most of the third world countries particularly among the Islamic countries religions and religious groups have played important role in the liberation struggles . However , in most of these struggles the leadership was provided by the modern elite, trained and oriented in western liberal tradition or in socialist ethos and it was these groups and people who assumed power after the change. So far, Iran is possible the only country where the

revolution was brought about under the leadership of religious clergy with active support of masses, and other classes played only secondary and subservient role.

Therefore when the revolution occurred it was religious clergy that came into power and controlled the state apparatus. This religious clergy had the advantage of being well organized in hierarchical order in accordance with the shi-i (Islamic) tradition . This constituted a fundamental change in the power structure of Iran. The new constitutional order reflected this shift. Iran was declared to be an Islamic Republic and the constitution that was framed, in spite of some institutional resemblance was distinct in content from the secular democratic and liberal frameworks of the west . Instead of being based on the concept of popular sovereignty the new system is supposed to reflect divine guidance by working within the Islamic (Shi-i) legal frame work . The Iranian Islamic republic is based on belief in God, Divine revelation and its fundamental role in setting of the laws of the land.

A new concept of Vilayat-e-Faghih was introduced according to which the constitution of the Islamic Republic provides that during the occultation of the 12th Imam Faghih (*jurist*) possessing the requisite qualities should shoulder responsibilities of the leadership. Such a leader enjoys extensive powers with legal political and military dimensions.

Another institution created is the Guardian council that comprises of six qualified jurist selected by the leader and six jurists elected by the Majlis (Iranian parliament) from the list of persons proposed by the supreme Judicial council . This Council is responsible for organizing elections . It has the power of review the laws passed by the Iranian Majlis to ascertain that whether such laws are in conformity with Islam or not. No bill can become law unless ratified by the council.

The ideological distinction and its appeal that transcends its geographical borders gave Iran power that has been disproportionate to its objective physical parameters. So Iran after revolution emerged as a very important power independent of both Western and Eastern camps.

This posed a greater challenge to the west particularly to the United states as it could not digest the fact that the country that had worked as a vital pillar in its security arrangement for the vital region of the Persian Gulf should itself cause the greatest threat to its interest in the area. So it tried its best to undermine and destabilize the revolution in Iran through different means by employing economic and political pressures to weaken the regime there[13]. However , the Islamic revolution in Iran with its strong base could not be destabilized by all this . Iran stood on its position as firmly as it could with in of course some constraints of international

system making it to suffer a number of disadvantages . however , for about a decade after the revolution its security was also indirectly guaranteed by an inbuilt system of checks and balances of bi-polar world system that offered it relatively greater amount of freedom of independent action than it could have otherwise got.

However , with the breakdown of Soviet Union Iranians are some what more apprehensive of American designs and its claim to world leadership. They have expressed serious suspicions about what Americans called the new world order which gives that latter unquestionable supremacy particularly after operation desert storm launched to expel Iraqis from Kuwait. It is natural for Iran to look for stronger allies preferably in its vicinity. This explains its quest for building up relations with two major powers like India and China. Both India and Chin have their own reasons to reciprocate positively to such a venture.

Such a grouping is going to be potentially very important and powerful especially in the context of universal quest for cooperation at regional levels. It need not be based only on shared negative concerns about a given world situation. For any meaningful cooperation there must be positive parameters also present . in addition for its own ideological reasons Iran might find it difficult to leave Pakistan

out of such grouping. There is also a danger that the left out Pakistan may be pushed further into greater dependence and alignment with outside forces thereby causing considerable damage to the prospects of regional cooperation. This is the reason for which Iranian President Hashmi Rafsanjani recently stated that such a grouping should include Pakistan as well. If such a thing happened then we might see that a very powerful regional grouping organization emerging with tremendous potentials for cooperation. However prerequisite for the success of such a venture is that India and Pakistan resolved their differences amicably.

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- [9]. See R.L.Chawla, "Economic Development of Iran", India Quarterly (New Delihi), vol.35, no.2, April-June 1979, p.179.
- [10]. For the activites of SAVAK see Baba, n.5, pp.19-21.
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- [12]. For details see Halliday, n.2, pp.310-22.
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