

Ayatollah Khomeini

Ayatollah Khomeini, who was born in 1902, comes from the small town of Khomayn, about 60 miles south west of Tehran. His family had long-standing links with the religious hierarchy of Shi'a Islam and with religious intellectual life in Iran.

Though his father was murdered by persons connected with local landowning interests, the young Ruhullah Khomeini was sent to Arak and, later, to Qom to study Islamic doctrine and sciences. The incipient confrontation between religion and state in Iran had begun as European colonial interest in Iran quickened – because of oil – at the start of the century. It became the dominant theme in political life during the period that Khomeini was in Qom because of the rise to power of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah. Reza Shah was determined to replicate the reforms achieved by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey and to destroy the central role played by Islam and the Shi'a clergy in Iranian life – in education, law and social values.

Meanwhile, Ruhullah Khomeini built up a considerable reputation as a teacher in Islamic ethics and philosophy. In 1941, he gave the first concrete evidence of his political consciousness in a short book, called *The Unveiling of Secrets*. In this study, Khomeini attacked Reza Shah as a usurper, the legislature as illegitimate and the authorities as arrogant and uncaring – all because of their refusal to accept the overriding moral precepts of Islam. He did not, however, attack the concept of monarchy as innately un-Islamic, only its incumbent for failing to consult the ulama, the religious jurists and leaders whose approval of the secular order would have legitimised it in muslim eyes.

It was only in 1962 that Ayatollah Khomeini – by then generally considered eminent enough for this honorific title – began to articulate his real political senti-

ments. They were provoked, first, by a new electoral law which would have permitted women and non-muslims to stand for municipal office. These proposals he condemned as anti-Islamic.

In 1963, the government proposed extensive land reforms – opposed by the religious hierarchy led by Khomeini on the grounds that the reforms were a fraud and a cover for satisfying foreign interests in Iran. The protest culminated in the destruction of a famous religious centre in Qom by the authorities and an open attack by Khomeini on the Shah. The speech led to his arrest.

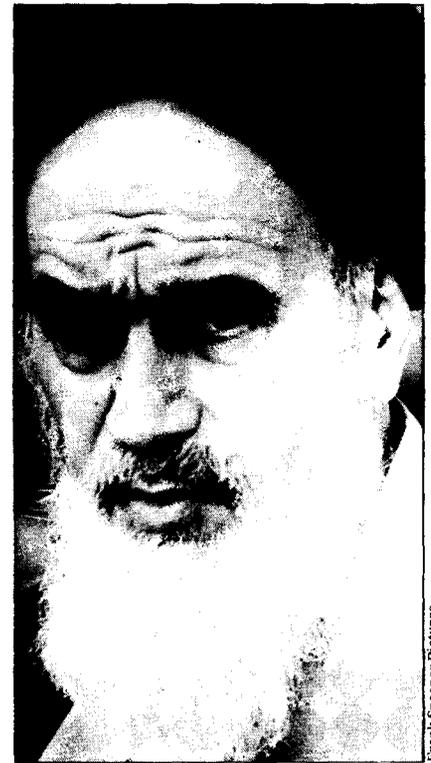
Release did not buy silence, however, and the Ayatollah was soon busy attacking the Shah's government for its secularism and links with the West. He sought national independence for Iran in the context of a government guided by Islamic principle in which the clergy would play an exemplary role but in which there would also be a constitutional role for the Shah. This apparent compromise, however, was soon ousted by a new crisis, when the Iranian government introduced a law providing diplomatic immunity for US military personnel and their dependents in Iran. Khomeini denounced the law as an attack on Iranian sovereignty and national integrity and, amid widespread popular demonstrations of support, he was arrested and bundled into exile in Bursa in Turkey in November 1964.

The following year he was allowed to move to the great Shi'a shrine of Najaf, in southern Iraq, where he was to stay until 1978. There he refined his religious and political ideas, now abandoning any thought of compromise with the Pahlavi dynasty and seeking a religious government, as described in his 1969 lecture series and published under the title of *Hukumat-i Islami* (Islamic government).

By the late 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini was the dominant influence in Iran opposed to the Shah, despite his exile, and Iran asked the Saddam Hussain government to expel him. The Iraqi authorities, already anxious over the growing politicisation of their own Shi'a populations, were happy to oblige.

Ayatollah Khomeini retired to France from where he masterminded the growing violence and revolutionary ferment. On returning to Tehran on February 1, 1979, he lost no time in destroying the remnants of the former regime and in constructing an Islamic government instead. Over the past eight years he has not deviated from this goal. With the passage of the Islamic constitution at the start of the 1980s, he saw the essential institutions of the new system in place: a parliament dominated by the clergy, an Islamic juridical council (the council of guardians) to vet legislation and himself as the supreme mentor and arbiter.

Yet the Iranian revolution is only half complete and the new Islamic structures often sit uncomfortably on top of the remnants of the previous regime. The formal structure of the state is paralleled by religious institutions, the infamous komitehs operated through the ministry of guidance and the vast network of mosques, and depending on the radicalism of the *Hibollahi* (the Party of God – religious zealots) and the *Pasdaran*. Revolutionary Guards double as police and as armed militants for a regime in which they are seen as the Islamic alternative to the regular armed forces. Even these groups merely provide a cover for barely concealed differences between moderates and radicals, with the latter seeking far more radical change – land reform, nationalisation of trade and other economic sectors – but frustrated so far by the conservative Council of Guardians. The Ayatollah almost certainly sympathises with the Council, for his political radicalism does not extend to economic affairs in which he is



Frank Spooner Pictures

Khomeini: Enigma

conscious of the place accorded to private property in Islam. Yet, at the same time, it is Ayatollah Khomeini who sustains consensus among this mass of antagonistic, competing interests and it is his prestige that guarantees his ability to do so.

The Ayatollah's intense nationalism is the other driving force behind the regime, for it is this that sustains the rancorous determination to destroy the government of Saddam Hussain in Baghdad for its aggression against Iran in September 1980. It is subsumed into a vision of Iran as the embodiment of the Islamic political ideal and of the need to wage 'eternal war' to bring down the Ba'ath secularists in Iraq for having threatened that ideal. When Khomeini does disappear, the political tensions in Tehran will come to the surface as the various factions compete for power. Yet, even the victors will still have to pay service to the ideology that Ayatollah Khomeini has imposed in Iran: the hegemony of Islamic radicalism over Iranian society and state.●

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