

1979 Islamic Revolution: Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran

January 13, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



1979 Islamic Revolution Latest News

- Protests that erupted in Iran in late December over rising inflation and economic distress have turned deadly, with at least 42 deaths reported by January 9.
- While authorities acknowledge economic hardships, they have responded with a strong crackdown on dissent.
- The unrest has created political space for **Reza Pahlavi**, son of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was overthrown in the **1979 Islamic Revolution**.
- Living in exile, Pahlavi has sought to position himself as a rallying figure amid the turmoil.

Origins of the Pahlavi Dynasty

- Reza Shah Pahlavi, grandfather of Reza Pahlavi, rose from a military background and seized power in **1925** after a **coup** against **Ahmad Shah Qajar**.

- His takeover occurred amid imperial pressures, with Britain and Russia vying for influence in Iran.

Foreign Influence and Economic Concessions

- Iran's vulnerability was underscored by sweeping concessions to foreign powers.
- In 1872, a British company secured extensive industrial and mineral rights from the **Qajar dynasty**—later criticised by Lord Curzon as an unprecedented surrender of national resources.
- Though revoked, the episode highlighted Iran's subjugation to external interests.

Abdication and Wartime Upheaval

- Reza Shah abdicated in 1941 after Allied forces invaded Iran, citing its ties with Germany.
- This shifted national sentiment toward democratic leadership and sovereignty.

Mossadegh and the Oil Nationalisation Drive

- Mohammed Mossadegh, a Western-educated jurist, became Prime Minister (1951–1953) and championed **nationalising Iran's oil** to benefit its people.
- His stance antagonised Western powers, particularly Britain, which had controlled Iranian oil through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum).

The 1953 Coup and Restoration of the Shah

- Fearing loss of strategic and economic interests, Britain—with US backing—engineered regime change in 1953.
- Mossadegh was arrested, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was restored to power, entrenching the Pahlavi monarchy under Western support.

Iran under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi

- Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued social and economic modernisation, but his rule remained authoritarian.
- A key instrument of repression was **SAVAK**, the secret police notorious for surveillance, arrests, and torture of dissidents.
- Independent political and civic institutions were not allowed to function.
 - As noted by historians, political parties, unions, student groups, and civic organisations were suppressed, forcing dissent into mosques and giving the opposition a growing religious character.

Rise of Mass Protests and Collapse of Monarchy

- By the 1970s, widespread dissatisfaction culminated in protests involving diverse groups, from communists to Islamists.
- Despite harsh crackdowns, sustained agitation weakened the regime's hold on power.
- **In 1979**, the Shah and his family fled Iran.
- A referendum soon after established an **Islamic Republic** with *Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader*.

- While the new regime promised change, it soon mirrored many authoritarian practices of the past, compounded by religious fundamentalism.

1979 Islamic Revolution

- The **1979 Islamic Revolution** overthrew the monarchy of **Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**, ending over five decades of Pahlavi rule in Iran.

Context and Causes

- The revolution was not a single event but a culmination of decade-long grievances against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.
 - **Political Autocracy:** The Shah ruled as a secular dictator, suppressing dissent through his brutal secret police, SAVAK.
 - **The “White Revolution”:** Launched in 1963, these were aggressive modernization and land reforms. While intended to modernize Iran, they alienated the traditional Ulema (clergy) and the rural peasantry.
 - **Westernization & Cultural Identity:** Rapid Western-style modernization was perceived as “Westoxification” (Gharbzadegi), undermining Iran’s Islamic and cultural fabric.
 - **Economic Disparities:** Despite high oil revenues, the gap between the rich (elite) and the poor (urban working class/migrant peasants) widened, fueled by corruption and inflation.
 - **Foreign Influence:** The Shah was seen as a “puppet” of the US, especially after the 1953 CIA-backed coup that ousted the democratically elected PM Mohammad Mossadegh.

Key Events of the Revolution (1978–1979)

- **Jan 1978:** Protests ignited in Qom after a state-sponsored article insulted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was in exile.
- **Black Friday (Sept 1978):** Security forces fired on protesters in Tehran’s Jaleh Square, leading to massive casualties and making the revolution irreversible.
- **Shah’s Departure:** On January 16, 1979, the Shah fled Iran for Egypt.
- **Khomeini’s Return:** On February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned from exile to a rapturous welcome.
- **Proclamation of the Republic:** On April 1, 1979, following a national referendum, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic.

Post-Revolutionary Governance: Velayat-e Faqih

- The new political system was based on Khomeini’s doctrine of “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist”:
 - **Theocracy + Democracy:** It blended republican elements (Parliament/Majlis, President) with theocratic ones (Supreme Leader, Guardian Council).
 - **Sovereignty:** Unlike Western democracies where sovereignty lies with the people, here it is derived from Divine Will, interpreted by the Supreme Leader.

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