

*Monarchy, modernity and democracy*  
*The Pahlavi Case in Iran*  
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*A Memo in Out-line*  
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The Breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The Deputy elected by the Lord  
*Richard II, Shakespeare*

- *The contradictions of a modernizing monarch:* In his “End of the Tour” report in 1975, Richard Helms, the storied Director of the CIA, and US Ambassador to Iran in the early seventies, wrote of the Shah as a “modernizing authoritarian monarch” caught in the web of a dangerous “conflict between rapid economic growth and modernization *vis-à-vis* a still autocratic rule.” This conflict, according to Helms, was the “greatest uncertainty” marring an “otherwise optimistic” report of economic growth.” The Shah’s economic policies had created a viable middle and technocratic class, and their desire for political power, Helms knew, was the great challenge facing not only the Shah, but also US policy. But Helms also knew that, “History provides discouraging precedents about ...an absolute ruler willingly loosening the reins of power.”<sup>1</sup>
- *From the Curse of History to the Curse of Oil:* Long before the sudden surge of Petro-Dollars created in the Shah a false sense of certitude and security, long before he began to disparage the “blue-eyed world” for the failures of its democracy and praised his own style of monarchical despotism as something not just in synch with the *Geist* of the Iranian nation and History, but a source of salvation for the West, the Shah often showed anxiety about a looming threat to the monarchical system in the modern world. The death of each monarchy—from Egypt and Greece to Afghanistan and Iraq—brought fear to his heart and convinced him that his own end is near. Faced with falling or failed monarchies,

he invariably offered help. Sometimes, as in the case of Afghanistan, when monarchy was ended by a coup, the Shah tried to convince Zahar Shah to receive Iranian aid for a restoration of monarchy. Other times, as in the case of Jordan, and Morocco, he gave troubled monarchs military and financial help in fighting foes. If in the fifties he felt insecure as the result of what he thought was the curse of History, in the seventies, his political bravura, his false sense of security even superiority, his disdain for democratic advice from the US were all the results of the curse of oil.

- *History of a troubled Institution:* What should have given the Shah particular cause for concern was the troubled nature of the Iranian monarchical institution he had inherited. Though in 1971, with great fanfare and at an exorbitant price, he forced the nation to celebrate what he called the twenty-five hundred years of monarchy in Iran, the last one hundred fifty years of that rule had betrayed systemic fragilities in the institution. Beginning in 1850, every monarch who came to the throne in Iran either died at the assassin's hand, or in exile. The only one who died in Iran, and of natural causes was Mozzafar-al-Din Shah, the man who, in 1907 signed a decree that accepted the demands of the unfolding Constitutional Revolution and allowed for the establishment of a limited constitutional monarchy in Iran. The new Iranian constitution was modeled after Belgium and England. The monarch was no longer the fount of all political power. Till then, commensurate with the nature of what Marx called Iran's oriental despotism, or what Max Weber called the "Sultanist system," the monarch was the ultimate and sole source of political power. Henceforth, the monarch was a little more than a mere symbol of national unity and historic continuity. In the language of the Iranian constitution, the king was *to reign, but not rule*. Such a formulation allowed political power to be placed in the hands of elected institutions, while preserving some symbolic function for the king. If under traditional monarchies, sovereignty lies with the king, in transitional monarchies, like the one stipulated in the constitution of 1905, a kind of dual sovereignty is posited—a king as the symbol of national sovereignty, and elected

officials embodying popular sovereignty. Concurrently the language of legitimacy is also transformed from a discourse of “anointed” kings and their divine rights to a discourse of popular sovereignty and the social contract. If in the dual sovereignty of the Constitutional Revolution, greater weight is given to the power of the citizens, the 1979 Constitution reverses the balance, affording nearly all power in the hands of the unelected “*Valiye Fagih*” whose legitimacy is “divine,” while leaving a semblance of power for elected officials and institutions. It is not an accident that structural frailties of the monarchy, as an institution, began to appear just as the challenges and temptations of modernity began in Iran.

- *Machiavelli, Modernity and Monarchy: Inherent contradictions?*: While Helms and the Shah both saw the problem of Iranian monarchy as tactical and transitional, five hundred years earlier, Machiavelli was the first political thinker to realize that the looming threat to monarchies was historic and fundamental, and that a transition to a more democratic polity was inevitable. The age of inherited power and legitimacy—the defining hallmark of monarchy—he suggested, is ending. With the advent of the theory of natural rights of men and women, including the right to choose their own rulers, the new Prince, Machiavelli suggested, must manufacture his own legitimacy. Acquired or “borrowed” majesty, as Shakespeare wrote, is hard to acquire. Moreover, the mundane details of everyday life has a corrosive power on the haloed majesty of monarchs. Traditional monarchies protected sovereigns and their subjects from this danger by suffusing the life of royalty from birth in a mist of majesty and mystery. Future kings often lived in the lush isolation of “Forbidden Cities” and while such estrangement and isolation dampened their abilities to cope with reality, it afforded them the requisite aura of mystery. While traditional monarchies thrived on the idea of divine legitimacy, and thus required pious and docile subjects, modernity begets and demands instead a knowledgeable citizenry. Traditional monarchies and their claim of divine legitimacy is incompatible with modernity, and the idea of “social contract. Moreover, monarchies are threatened by the inquisitive gaze of scholars, and the intrusive eyes of the modern media.

## Monarchy in transition: Iran/4

Investigative journalists and archives, and cameras that capture the life of royalty in every mundane detail, leave little to imagination. Monarchies demand the ambiguity and opacity that are the stuff of majestic mystery. Monarchies require a certain degree of opacity, and modernity is an age of transparency. Modernity, in the words of Weber, “disenchants” the world, and this disenchantment also “demystifies” the majesty of monarchy.

- *Modernization in the Shadow of two coups:* The Pahlavi dynasty was founded by Reza Shah in 1925, and ended in 1979 during the rule of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. Father and son tried to establish the traditional authority of monarchs in an age when the Iranian society was beginning to experience the pangs of modernity. Both monarchs accomplished much in terms of modernizing Iran. Reza Shah in fact took what was a virtual “failed state” in post-World War One Iran and from its fragments forged a new modern nation. Between 1800 to 1921, Iran had lost more than half of its territory to Tsarist Russia, and at least a quarter of its population to famine, cholera and Spanish flu. Opium addiction and illiteracy were endemic; and “war-lords” and centrifugal forces threatened not just the territorial integrity of the country but the very existence of a nation called Iran. In 1921 Reza Khan, a colonel in the Cossack Brigade—an army commanded till 1917 by Tsarist officers-- and a cleric turned firebrand journalist, named Seyyed Zia organized a coup that began to build the fractious process of modern nation building. From the outset, the coup was, in the public perception, masterminded by the British government. The “coup cabinet” last only a hundred days, but within four years, Reza Khan had become the new king and the founder of the new dynasty which took its name, Pahlavi, from ancient Pre-Islamic Persia. Reza Khan, by then already a devotee of Ataturk in Turkey, was bent on making Iran a republic and himself its first president. Ironically, it was the Shiite clerics who, frightened by the prospects of either a Communist style atheism or Ataturk style radical secularism, dissuaded Reza Khan from the idea of a republic. He became king instead and immediately began to challenge the power and authority of the clergy. Though in his short reign (1925-1941) Reza Shah accomplished

astonishing feats of modernization—from building a transnational railroad and commencing compulsory education for boys and girls to building the first modern university and supporting a budding industrial sector—his legacy has been marred by his personal corruption, his ruthless despotism, and his tarnished image as a ruler who seized power through a coup master-minded by the British. The “acquired” legitimacy of a new Prince eluded him. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) also accomplished much by way of modernizing the country, and its infrastructure. From land-reform and enfranchisement of women to the creation of a vast network of new industries and the creation of a large highly trained technocratic class, each a hallmark of a modernization were accomplished in his time. By 1975, based on nearly every key indicator, Iran was on par with Turkey, South Korea and Taiwan. All three countries are now thriving democracies, and Iran is one of the most despotic regimes in the world. Yet, the fact that the Shah fled Iran in 1953 when his attempt to topple the democratically-elected nationalist government of Mossadeq failed, the perception that he was restored to power with the help of a CIA-MI6 coup, as well as allegations of corruption against him and his family, and finally his insistence on authoritarian rule tarnished his image. It is tempting to ponder what might have happened to Iran if the Shah had shown a willingness to share power with the rising middle class in mid-seventies, when the king was perceived to be at the height of his power.

- *Pahlavi paradigms of modernity*: The Pahlavi father and son shared many fundamental axioms in their paradigms of modernity; they both believed in a state-dominated capitalist economy; both used the coercive power of the authoritarian state to regulate the economy, including setting mandatory prices; they both believed in concentrating on heavy “lead” industries—steel mills for the father, and a steel mill and nuclear energy for the son—and both worked hard to improve the infrastructure; both believed in women’s enfranchisement; both were surprisingly strong advocates of allowing members of all religious minorities—from the Shiite “sanctioned” religious minorities, or “*ahle-ketab*” (People of the

Book) like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity to Bahais, dismissed by the Shiite clergy as nothing more than a sect—more or less equal rights with Muslims. Where the two differed radically was on the role of clergy and Islam. Reza Shah, taking his cues from Ataturk, wanted a thoroughly secularized society. He took away the clergy's economic power by depriving them of the rich religious endowments or *Vagf*. He limited the number of the clergy in each city; his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, however, considered the communists the greatest threat to his throne and considered the clergy, and the Islamic forces a powerful ally in the fight against communists. While his authoritarianism led to a scorched earth policy against the Iranian democratic and leftist forces, the religious forces were allowed to set up a nimble, multi-faceted political and ideological network of organizations. The mosques, whose number saw an unprecedented rise in the last years of the Shah's rule were only the tip of this ice-berg. Father and son also shared the belief that modernization of the economy and the infrastructure is far more important than political democracy. In fact authoritarianism, Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah believed, is the inevitable price for rapid economic growth. Moreover, the Shah believed that oil revenues will allow him to buy the political acquiescence of the middle classes by affording these classes economic affluence. What is today dubbed "the China Model"—economic liberalization and prosperity concurrent with consolidated political despotism—was in fact first tried by the Shah. It was a policy to combine his authoritarian monarchy with the ethos of a Western-oriented modernization and rapid economic growth. In reality, if we take Iran as a case study, the conclusion seems inevitable that the survival of modern monarchies as an institution is predicated on their willingness to resign themselves to symbolic, if not ceremonial power.

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<sup>i</sup> NSA, Doc. No 979, 9US Embassy, Tehran, Iran, "End of Tour Report, Richard Helms," August 4, 1975