

The word “democracy” comes from the Greek "demos" meaning "people" and "kratos" meaning "rule,” but as the wheels of history moved along, it became evident that the rule of the majority can actually lead to a terrible disregard of the rights of minorities, so in the modern world, democracy is defined by civil and political rights. But will democracy ever be possible in Iran? In order to answer this question, we should learn a little about Iran’s history. In this essay, I will not attempt to give a complete history lesson, but I will do my best to help the average reader who doesn’t have the time or patience to read all the available books to gain a very basic understanding of the complexities of Iran’s history.

In 1935, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was the king of Iran at the time, declared “Iran” the official name of Persia (Persia was the name by which the country had been known in the Western world for a very long time). The name “Iran” is a cognate of “Aryan” and means "Land of the Aryans.” A few Persian scholars protested this decision on the grounds that it created a break with the history of the country and that it seemed to be influenced by the Aryan propaganda of Nazi Germany, but Reza Shah argued that, in their own language, the people of Persia had called their country “Iran” for hundreds of years and that “Pars” or “Fars,” from which “Persia” had derived, was the name of a province in central Iran. He hoped that officially calling the country Iran would give it a modern image.

The term “Iran” in modern Persian derives from the Proto-Iranian term *Aryānām*, which was first attested in Zoroastrianism's Avesta tradition. *Ariya* and *Airiia* are also attested as an ethnic designator in Achaemenid inscriptions. The term *Ērān* (from Middle Persian) is found on the inscription that accompanies the investiture relief of Ardashir I (the founder of the Sassanid Dynasty who ruled Persia in 3rd century) at Naqsh-e-Rustam. In this inscription, the king's appellation in Middle Persian contains the term *ērān*, while in the Parthian language inscription that accompanies it, the term *aryān* describes Iran. In Ardashir's time, *ērān* retained this meaning, referring to the people rather than the state. Finally, in 1953, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Reza Shah’s son) announced that both "Iran" and "Persia" could be used.

Historically, Persians were the people of the Great Persian Empire, which became the first super power of the world about 2500 years ago, of the land of the great Achaemenid kings (ca 550 B.C. to 330 B.C.) like Cyrus and Dariush, who made Persia the largest empire the world had ever seen. And these kings were not mere conquerors; they had also shown respect and tolerance toward other cultures, as the Persians allowed local cultures to survive. This was not only good for their subjects, but it also benefited the Achaemenids, because the conquered peoples did not feel a need to revolt. The Achaemenid Empire ended with the defeat of the army of King Darius III by Alexander of Macedonia (Alexander the Great) and his troops.

The Arabs conquered Persia at around 650 AD and introduced their religion, Islam, to the region, where the main religion had been Zoroastrianism. The Mongols attacked the Persian Empire at around 1220AD and took it over, and a couple of hundred years later, Persia was left in ruins and remained divided until the rise of the Safavid Dynasty in 16th century. The Safavids were followers of Shia Islam, and under their rule, Persia became the largest Shia country in the Muslim world and had its last period as a

major imperial power. In the 18th century, the Safavids were weakened because of the attacks of the Russians and the Ottomans and bloody battles in Afghanistan. The Afghans were Sunni and didn't want to accept the Shia religion. All of this turmoil made Persia vulnerable to the European Colonial powers and caused it to become economically dependant on Europe. Persia was now sandwiched between the Russian and the British Empires, which each carved pieces out of it, pieces that became Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan.

As you can see, up to this point in history, Persia was attacked and almost completely destroyed by large armies at least 3 times, but every time it somehow managed to stand on its feet and contribute to the human civilization. The first line of Richard Nelson Frye's latest book (*Greater Iran*, Mazda Publishers, 2005) reads: "Iran's glory has always been its culture," and I think this sentence perfectly describes the fact that throughout centuries, Persia has produced hundreds of exceptional musicians, architects, artists, writers, poets, and dancers who have affected the world. Each conqueror forced upon the people of Persia its own religion and culture, and Persians showed that they had an amazing ability to adopt parts of the new culture and add it to their own, creating a very complex identity that needs to be studied, understood, and respected, as it carries the human experience of hundreds of years of history.

The Qajar Dynasty ruled Iran from 1779 to 1925, and Mozaffaredin Shah-eh Gajar granted a concession to William Knox D'Arcy (the Anglo-Persian Oil Company or APOC) to explore and work the newly discovered oil fields in southwest Persia, which started production in 1914. According to this agreement, Persia would receive only %16 of the company's net profit from its oil operations.

The Persian Constitutional Revolution took place between 1905 and 1911 and led to the establishment of the Persian Parliament or Majles. During the Qajar dynasty, the influence of Russia and Great Britain had become more and more evident in the country. Persia was in financial crisis, and the expenses of the government far exceeded its revenues, and, as a result, Qajar Kings took far too many loans from European powers and sold more or less everything the country owned. This crisis came to its peak during the reign of Mozaffaredin Shah-eh Qajar, who, like his predecessors, had an extravagant life style. This situation brought about many protests, which were led by the educated elite and religious leaders who were troubled by the extent of foreign influence in Persia, and resulted in the Constitutional Revolution, which was to limit the power of the monarchy and give a say to the people. This revolution was meant to end the old order and create a new social and political system that was full of promises of a better future. Average people in the cities became engaged in discussions on rights, freedom, and justice, and democracy suddenly seemed within grasp. Some historians argue that the movement that began this revolution didn't end with it but was followed by the Constitutionalist Movement of Gilan (also known as the Jangal Movement of Gilan), which wanted to turn Persia into a republic. Gilan is a province in north-west Iran on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea.

Mirza Koochak Khan Jangali was the leader of the Jangal Movement. He was a cleric and had studied theology in Rasht (the Capital of Gilan) and Tehran. In 1914, he met with other prominent figures of the Constitutional Revolution in Tehran and helped

organize a plan of reform, which called for the total independence of the nation, land and social reforms for the poor, and Islamic unity. However, the ruling feudalistic society was not ready to give up on its privileges and respect the newly elected parliament. In June 1908, the parliament was shut down during a coup d'état ordered by the new monarch, Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar. The Russian Cossack Brigade under the command of Colonel Liakhov, who served the Shah, bombarded the Parliament and arrested the pro-democracy people and the social leaders such as journalists and members of the Parliament. Uprisings followed in particular in Tabriz, Ardabil, and Rasht. Finally, in July 1909 the national revolutionary forces from Gilan and central Iran (Bakhtiari tribes) were united to attack and conquer the capital, Tehran. Mirza Koochak Khan was one of the lower-rank commanders of the force that invaded the capital from the north.

Unfortunately, given the shortcomings of the activists of the time on one hand and the strong establishment of the old autocracy on the other, the same privileged class and their political representatives took control of the new system, and the freedom fighters were forcibly disarmed. Meanwhile, the direct and indirect manipulation of the country's internal politics by Tsarist Russians and the British resulted in social unrest. It was during this tumultuous period that, in collaboration with the Society of Islamic Union, Mirza Koochak Khan started his uprising in the forests of Gilan. His return to Rasht had not been easy, as the Russian Consulate had expelled him from Gilan. His forces defeated the local governmental and Russian troops, and this added to their reputation as potential saviors of the ideas of the Constitutional Revolution.

When in 1918 the Red Army conquered Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, the White Army Navy retreated to Anzali Port, which is on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea and in the province of Gilan and was under control of the British army, and the British granted them asylum. The Red Navy followed the Whites and conquered Anzali, causing the British Army to retreat. The Soviet revolutionaries gave Mirza a promise of support if he agreed to announce the Socialist Republic of Gilan, and he agreed under the condition that the Soviets would not interfere in the internal affairs of the Republic. However, soon disagreements arose between Mirza and his group of advisors on one side and the Soviets and the Iranian Communist Party (evolved from the Baku based Edalat Party) on the other. By 1921 and particularly after an agreement was achieved between the Soviet Union and Britain, the Soviets decided not to further support the Socialist Republic of Gilan and the government forces led by Reza Khan, who, was the commander of Persia's Russian-trained Cossack Brigade at the time, crushed the dispersed forces of the Jungle Republic. Mirza died from exposure in Khalkhal Mountains. A local landlord decapitated his body and displayed his head in Rasht.

I have always been very interested in the Constitutional Revolution and everything that followed it, as I believe that in order to understand the 1979 Islamic Revolution, we have to travel all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century. In the early 1900s, the people of Iran were sick and tired of foreign intervention and wanted democracy, but their efforts eventually failed not only as a result of the refusal of foreign governments to take a step back but also because of the mistakes and shortcomings of their own leaders. However, their struggle did bring about some positive change. Having lived through the 79 Revolution, I have come to understand that wanting democracy and getting it are very different from one another and that any revolution can be hijacked by

those who are in reality its enemies when they pretend to be its supporters. All human beings have a tendency to divide the world into black and white when there are many different shades of gray in between. As a result, when we look at history, we see historical figures as either heroes or villains, and we elevate our heroes to the level of saints and see the villains as the embodiment of the Devil. Of course, I don't mean to deny that there have been and will be saints and that there have been and will be those who have done evil to a point that feels incomprehensible (Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Khomeini, etc.), but in most cases, leaders who have good intentions sometimes make terrible mistakes. As I was reading about Mirza Koochak Khan and his movement, his life amazed me. In this essay, it is not the place or time for me to write everything I have read and learned about him, but it is important to know that there are those who see him as a hero and those who have no doubt he was a villain. So who was he really? I think he was a very interesting and intelligent man, living during extraordinary times. I have come to believe that he had noble intentions, but like most of us, he made mistakes. There is a point of view that believes Mirza Koochak Khan and his inner circles were inherently incapable of accomplishing radical social changes such as eliminating feudalism in Gilan. Is this a possibility? Yes, it is. But does this make him a villain? Definitely not.

On February 21, 1921, Reza Khan staged a coup d'état and overthrew Ahmad Shah Qajar, the last king of the Qajar dynasty. According to some sources, the British Empire helped Reza Khan come to power to stop the penetration of the Bolsheviks in Iran. Reza Khan was declared Shah (King), in 1925 and began the Pahlavi Dynasty with a vision of modernizing Iran. During his 16-year reign, he built the trans-Iranian Railway, which connected the north of the country to the south. He built many roads, introduced modern education to the country by establishing University of Tehran, and built many modern industrial plants. At the beginning of his reign, all women in Iran wore the hejab in public, as it had been their religious tradition for hundreds of years. Muslim women wore it because this was the way it had been since anyone could remember and protesting it would be considered anti Islam. I remember stories that my grandmother told me about how strange it had been for her to wear the hejab when she first came to Iran from Russia, but this was the way of life in her new country, and even though a Christian, she had to abide by it. In another attempt to modernize Iran, in the late 30s, Reza Shah declared the hejab illegal, as he believed that it held women back and prevented them from taking an active role in the progress of the country. After Reza Shah's decree against the hijab, if a woman wore the chador or the headscarf in public, the police would forcibly remove it from her or even arrest her if she resisted.

There is no doubt that Reza Khan ruled with an iron fist. He had no tolerance for criticism and created a dictatorship where freedom of speech did not exist and anyone who dared criticize him would be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed. He arrested many political leaders including Mohammad Mosaddeq, and gave the order for the killing of others like Teymourtash (his Minister of Court from 1925 to 1932). He confiscated land from the Qajars and from his rivals and added them to his own estates. Corruption continued under his rule and became even more wide spread. He became completely dependent on his military force, and, in return, the army regularly received up to 50 percent of the government's revenue.

In August 1941, the Allied Forces occupied Iran by a massive air, land, and naval assault, forcing Reza Shah to step aside in favour of his son. The invasion was allegedly in fear that Reza Shah was about to align his petroleum-rich country with Nazi Germany during the war. However, Reza Shah's earlier Declaration of Neutrality and refusal to allow Iranian territory to be used as a transport corridor to ship arms to the Soviet Union for its war effort against Germany was the strongest motive for the allied invasion of Iran. It was impossible at the time to get supplies to the Soviets through Europe, as the Nazis were everywhere, so the only remaining option was to go the other way through the Persian Gulf and provide help to the Soviets from behind the enemy lines. Because of its importance in the allied victory, Winston Churchill called Iran "The Bridge of Victory." Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, officially replaced his father on September 16, 1941. Reza Shah was soon forced into exile in British territories, first to Mauritius, then to Durban and Johannesburg, South Africa, where he died on July 26, 1944.

On April 28, 1951, the Majles named Mohammad Mosaddeq as the new prime minister of Iran. He had started his political career with the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and had been elected to the new Iranian Parliament at the age of 24. On May 1, Mosaddeq nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and the relationship between Iran and Britain soured, and Britain put in every effort to make sure Iran could not sell any oil. The AIOC evacuated its technicians and closed down oil installations. Under nationalized management, many refineries lacked properly trained technicians who were needed to continue production, and the entire Iranian oil industry came to a virtual standstill. The British government announced a blockade and reinforced its naval force in the Persian Gulf and placed complaints against Iran before the United Nations Security Council. This crisis reduced Iran's oil income to almost nothing, putting a severe strain on the implementation of Mossadeq's promised domestic reforms. At the same time, British Petroleum and Aramco doubled their production in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq to make up for lost production in Iran so that no hardship was felt in Britain.

On July 16, 1952, during the royal approval of his new cabinet, Mosaddeq insisted on the constitutional prerogative of the prime minister to appoint a Minister of War and a Chief of Staff, something the Shah had always done before. The Shah refused, and Mosaddeq announced his resignation, appealing directly to the public for support. Ahmad Qavam, who was a veteran politician, was appointed as Iran's new prime minister. On the day of his appointment, he announced his intention to resume negotiations with the British to end the oil dispute. The National Front (a political party founded by Masaddeq in the late 40s) along with various nationalist, Islamist, and socialist parties and groups, including Tudeh (the communist party of Iran) called for protests, strikes, and mass demonstrations in favour of Mossadeq. Major strikes broke out in all of Iran's major towns, and the Bazaar closed down in Tehran. Many protestors were killed by the army, but after five days of mass demonstrations, the army commanders ordered their soldiers back to their barracks, as they were worried that the soldiers might sympathize with the people. Frightened by the unrest, Shah dismissed Qavam and re-appointed Mosaddeq, granting him the full control of the military, as he had previously demanded.

With further rise of his popularity, Mosaddeq convinced the parliament to grant him emergency powers for six months, and with his emergency powers, he tried to

strengthen the democratically-elected political institutions by limiting the monarchy's unconstitutional powers, cutting Shah's personal budget, forbidding him to communicate directly with foreign diplomats, and transferring royal lands back to the state. In January 1953, Mosaddeq successfully pressured the Parliament to extend his emergency powers for another 12 months, and he decreed a land reform law that established village councils and increased the peasants' share of production. All of this weakened the aristocracy, abolishing Iran's centuries-old feudal agriculture sector. However, as a result of the British boycott, Iranians were becoming poorer by the day. Mossadeq's political coalition was beginning to fray and several former members of the coalition began to turn against him. At the same time, the government of the United Kingdom had grown increasingly distressed over Mosaddeq's policies and was especially bitter over the loss of their control of the Iranian oil industry, as repeated attempts to reach a settlement had failed.

Unable to resolve the issue single handedly, Britain looked towards the United States to settle this issue and insisted that Mosaddeq was moving Iran towards Communism. Soon the United States and Britain began to publicly denounce Mosaddeq's policies as harmful to Iran, and eventually they staged a coup against him through a plot that was known as "Operation Ajax." The Shah returned to Iran from his short self-imposed exile on August 22, 1953, and Mosaddeq was tried by a military tribunal for high treason. Even though the death penalty would have applied to him according to the laws of the day, he was sentenced to 3 years of solitary confinement in a military prison, but he was exiled to his village not too far from Tehran and remained under house arrest till he died in 1967.

With the coup against Mosaddeq, Iran's hopes for democracy died one more time, and the bitter memory of those days remained in the hearts of the people who had witnessed them. I have spent a great deal of time thinking of what would have happened if the British and the Americans had stayed out of the internal affairs of Iran at that time, but this was most probably about oil and money for them, and they would have done anything to ensure that their profits in the region would not be decreased. If Mosaddeq had been able to continue his reforms, would the Islamic Revolution of 1979 ever have happened? Of course, it is needless to say that history is very complicated and many conditions need to come together in order for a revolution to happen. However, in my humble opinion, the coup against Mossadeq was a very big factor in the revolt of the people of Iran against the Shah in 1979.

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi reigned Iran as a dictator and anyone who opposed or criticized him was arrested, tortured, and even executed. The foreign influence in Iran continued, and even though Iran seemed more and more modern in the 60s and the 70s, the truth was that it had been pushed to this point and had not arrived here on its own. Every time that the people of Iran had struggled for democracy, their efforts had been demolished by Western powers, and, as a result, a deep hatred of Western governments silently brewed in the hearts of many Iranians, as they were simply tired of being pushed around and used, and signs of discontent began to appear here and there.

Now is the time for me to tell you a little about the main political groups of the opposition during the time of the Shah:

1. The Tudeh Party of Iran was established after the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941-42 and after Reza Shah's exile, which resulted in the freedom of many political prisoners, many of whom had been in prison for their communist tendencies. At the beginning, the Tudeh Party was supposed to be more liberal than radical, but it quickly moved to the far left. In the mid 40s it became rather popular and published a newspaper, which had a circulation of a 100,000. This was the height of the Party's intellectual influence, which came in large part as the result of the propaganda of the Soviet Union as it called itself "the world's most progressive nation." Few intellectuals dared oppose the Party even if they did not join it. Finally in circa 1948, writer Jalal Al-e-Ahmad left the Party in protest against its pro-Soviet policies, and this brought an end to the Party's hegemony over intellectual life in Iran. In the early fifties, the Tudeh did not directly support Mosaddeq, but it supported the nationalization of oil and Mosaddeq's reforms. After the coup against Mosaddeq, the Shah declared the Tudeh party illegal, and his secret police (SAVAK) arrested many of its members, but the Tudeh continued to exist underground, and in the seventies its membership increased in Iran's universities, which were the centres of revolutionary activities.

2. In the 60s, a few university students at university of Tehran came together and created an organization named the People's Mojahedeen of Iran or PMOI (also known as the MKO), opposing the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. For the first 5 years of their existence, they did mostly ideological work, creating a mixture of Islam and Marxism, which became their ideology. Then they picked up arms and assassinated a few government officials and a few Americans who worked in Iran. The PMOI did not attract too many Iranians before the revolution, even though they had found some support within universities. They supported Khomeini in late seventies, believing that after the fall of the Shah, they would have a say in the government. However, by 1980 when Khomeini began to crack down on all opposition groups, they realized that things were not going as planned, and they began organizing protest rallies against the government. By this time, they had gathered huge support in high schools among teenagers. Soon after this, their members picked up arms against Khomeini's regime, and in spring 1981 when the wave of arrests began, most of their members and supporters were eventually arrested along with the members and supporters of other opposition groups.

3. Around the same time as the PMOI, a few small Marxist groups (like the Fadayian-eh Khalgh-eh Iran) also sprouted in Iran and picked up arms against the Shah, but they didn't find much popular support. Most of the members of all of these groups were arrested by the Shah's secret police and imprisoned. After the success of the Islamic revolution, like the PMOI, they enjoyed some support in high schools and universities, but most of their members and supporters were arrested in 1981-82.

4. In the late 40s, Mohammad Mosaddeq founded the National Front of Iran. The most important groups in the Front were the Iran Party, the Toilers Party, the National Party, and the Tehran Association of Bazaar Trade and Craft Guilds. In 1953, after the coup against Mosaddeq, the Shah declared the National Front illegal and arrested many of its leaders, but it continued to exist underground. During the next few years before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there was a great deal of disagreement between its leaders, and the Front was dissolved and reestablished a few times. After the success of the revolution, its leaders supported the Islamic republic with the hope that it would lead to

democracy. However, by 1982, it had become evident that Ayatollah Khomeini had no tolerance for criticism and many supporters of opposition groups had been and were being arrested. This was the end of the National Front in Iran, and a few of its leaders fled the country.

In January 1963, the Shah announced the "White Revolution," a six-point plan calling for land reform, nationalization of the forests, the sale of state-owned enterprises to the private sector, electoral changes to enfranchise women and allow non-Muslims to hold office, profit-sharing in industry, and a literacy campaign in the nation's schools. A few religious leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini, regarded some of these initiatives as dangerous, westernizing trends. Khomeini summoned a meeting with the other senior clerics of Qom and persuaded them to decree a boycott of the referendum on the White Revolution, and on January 22, 1963 he issued a strongly worded declaration denouncing the Shah and his plans. Two days later, the Shah took an armoured column to Qom and delivered a speech, harshly attacking religious clerics as a class, but Khomeini continued his denunciation of the Shah's programs, issuing a manifesto that bore the signatures of eight other senior Iranian Shia religious scholars. In it he listed the various ways in which the Shah had allegedly violated the constitution, and he condemned the spread of moral corruption in the country, accusing the Shah of submission to America and Israel. In June 1963, Khomeini was arrested and kept under house arrest for 8 months, and in November 1964, he was arrested again and held for 6 months. When he was released, the Prime Minister, Hassan Ali Mansur tried to convince him to apologize to the Shah and stop opposing him, but Khomeini refused, and, in his fury, Mansur slapped him. Two weeks later, Mansur was assassinated, and 4 members of Fadayian-eh Islam were executed for his murder. The Shah sent Khomeini into exile, and he spent about a year in Turkey, about 13 years in Iraq, and about 8 months in France before returning to Iran on February 1, 1979, shortly after the Shah left the country.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran happened because the people of Iran wanted democracy and freedom and an end to the constant foreign intervention in the country's affairs, and Khomeini promised to deliver all they wanted. They looked up to him, as he had strongly stood up against the Shah and had refused to back off. Most of his supporters, whether secular or religious, were not aware that he was planning to leave the power in the hands of one high-ranking cleric to basically govern the country. Khomeini and his advisors rewrote their proposed constitution, which was based on Islamic laws. Soon, the newspapers that had in any way criticized Khomeini and his plans were shut down, and those protesting the closings were attacked. Opposition groups were banned. Through popular support and with charges of questionable balloting, Khomeini's supporters gained an overwhelming majority of the seats of the Assembly of Experts, which revised the proposed constitution. The new constitution included an Islamic Supreme Leader of the country and a Council of Guardians, who could veto un-Islamic legislation and screen candidates for office, disqualifying those they found un-Islamic. The Council would be composed of six Islamic jurists who would be selected by the Supreme Leader of Iran, and six jurists specializing in different areas of law, who would be elected by the Majles from the Muslim jurists nominated by the Head of the Judicial

System (who, in turn, was also appointed by the supreme leader). Ayatollah Khomeini became the first Supreme Leader of Iran. The people of Iran had traded a king for a Supreme Leader, or one dictator for another, as it was impossible for Iran's new constitution to support democracy.

Soon after the revolution, the new government shut down parts of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, including the part of it that had to do with Iran's folk dancing, where my father worked. Dancing was declared illegal, and the only kind of music that was tolerated was military marches and religious chants. Also, many books were declared illegal, including the works of foreign writers like Jane Austin, Ernest Hemmingway, Mark Twain, etc., and the regime made it very clear that Iranian writers were not allowed to spread the influence of the West in Iran or write anything that could be considered against Islamic values. As a result, even writing about love between a man and a woman was banned. Before long, the hejab became mandatory, and groups of fanatical civilians, who called themselves "Hezbollah" or "the Party of God," attacked the women who didn't wear the hejab properly and beat them or sprayed acid in their faces. Women's rights were now written according to Sharia law, which allowed husbands to get away with abuse. I was 13 when the revolution succeeded, and only a few months after it, our wonderful teachers, who had provided us with good education since we had entered school, were replaced by fanatical young women, 18 or 19-year olds, who were not qualified to teach. Most of these women were members of the Revolutionary Guard, who were known for their brutality, and Islamic Committees. I didn't understand this at the time, but these new teachers were there to begin the Islamic Cultural Revolution, whose aim was to brainwash the young generation of Iran, and they spent most of our class time for government propaganda. All Iran's Universities were shut down from 1980 to 82 to be restructured and brought in line with Islam. During this period, all academics and students were screened and many of them who were suspected of having ties to the West or to opposition groups were fired or suspended. The taking over of the universities by the government forces had been violent, as leftist groups had a great deal of influence in Iranian universities at the time and rallied their forces. Many were killed, injured, or arrested. Years later in 2006, there were news of universities bracing for tighter state control over student bodies and faculties and perhaps even a second Cultural Revolution, and many veteran university professors were forced into retirement or dismissed and were replaced with young professors who had proven that they were in line with the Islamic policies of the government.

It is important to mention that the war between Iran and Iraq had quite an impact on the opposition in Iran. Whether secular or religious, left or right, Iranians are nationalists, and with the attack of Iraq on Iran, the government used the people's nationalistic sentiments to turn their attention from the rise of a terrible dictatorship in their country to the enemy that was threatening it from the outside. At the time, any political groups who opposed the regime were accused of being accomplices of Saddam Hussein.

The large majority of the thousands of young Iranians who were arrested in the early 80s for their alleged ties to opposition groups were teenagers, and they were imprisoned in many prisons across the country, the largest and most notorious of which was Evin Prison in north of Tehran, which had been built as a political prison during the

time of the Shah, and, after the success of the revolution, it was supposed to turn into a museum, but instead, it only became larger and more terrifying than ever before. I spent more than 2 years in Evin between 1982 and 84, and during my time, torture and execution were common practice there. Cells that during the time of the Shah held 5-6 prisoners, now held 50-70 people. On top of different forms of physical torture, psychological torture was also widely used, and mock executions, holding prisoners in solitary confinement or very small spaces called “graves” for extended amounts of time, and threatening the prisoners with the arrest of their family members, etc. were practiced on a regular basis to crush the prisoners and to mentally destroy them. Also, the brainwashing techniques used by the prison authorities went to the extreme, and the guards called the prisons “universities.” As all of this was happening in Iran, the international community remained silent and never strongly protested this horrific disregard of human rights, and the young people who suffered in Iran’s prisons during those years felt entirely forgotten and abandoned as a result. But this silence against the atrocities of the Iranian regime was not only happening abroad; it was also the case in the country. During the 80s, the government of Iran showed the people the high price of dissidence and injected fear in their blood by arresting their children. During those days, there was hardly a family that didn’t have a loved one in a prison, and silence became the only way to survive.

The Iran-Iraq war officially ended in August 1988 without any changes to the borders of Iran and Iraq. The war had no winner. About 1,000,000 people (military and civilian) were killed from both sides. On July 19, 1988, a systematic execution of Iran’s political prisoners began and continued for about 5 months, and the Iranian government tried to keep it a secret, but information soon began to leak. There are no exact numbers, but it is suspected that between 8,000 to 30,000 political prisoners were massacred during those months. There are different explanations on why this atrocity was committed. Some believe that it was the result of the attack of 7000 PMOI members, who had taken refuge in Iraq, on a city in north-west Iran. However, this attack happened on July 26, 1988, a week after the executions had begun. But it could be argued that maybe the Iranian authorities were somehow aware of this attack before it happened. Some scholars believe that the regime's internal dynamics were responsible. There were different factions in the government, and Khomeini felt a desperate need to hold his followers together and to purge the moderates. I have come to suspect that another reason for this could have been the fact the regime realized that its “tavvab” making had been a failure. “Tavvab” is an Arabic word, which means “repentant.” The prisoners who had broken under torture, confessed, and proclaimed that the government was “righteous” were called “tavvab” in the prison. But the officials gradually realized that most of the so-called tavvabs had not truly changed, and once released, they would return to their original beliefs and oppose the regime when the opportunity represented itself.

Iran has had 6 presidents so far, and Mohammad Khatami, who was the president from 1997 to 2005 just before Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was considered a reformist and raised the hopes of Iranians when it came to personal and social freedoms. During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami life did become a little easier for Iranians, but none of the changes Khatami made were fundamental. For example, the attacks of the Revolutionary Guard on the women who didn’t wear the hejab properly diminished, but husbands could still beat their wives without consequence. The number of the books that

reached the publication stage after falling into the pit of the Ministry of Information increased a little, but still, no severe criticism of the regime would be tolerated. Let's not forget that the Canadian-Iranian photo-journalist, Zahra Kazemi was brutally tortured in Evin Prison during the reign of Khatami, and she died there on July 11, 2003, as a result of her injuries. The government of Iran refused to return her body to her son who lived in Canada and very quickly buried her in Iran, claiming that she had died from a stroke while being interrogated. On July 16, 2003, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Iran's vice-president, conceded that Kazemi had died as a result of being beaten. Later, the Iranian government charged an Iranian security agent in Kazemi's death, but he was acquitted. In July 2004, Iran's judiciary said the head injuries that killed Kazemi were the result of an "accident." On March 31, 2005, Dr. Shahram Azam, a former staff physician in Iran's Defense Ministry revealed that, four days after her arrest, he had examined Kazemi in the hospital and that she showed obvious signs of torture, including: evidence of a very brutal rape, a skull fracture, two broken fingers, missing fingernails, a crushed big toe and a broken nose, severe abdominal bruising, swelling behind the head, a bruised shoulder, deep scratches on the neck, and evidence of flogging on the legs. All these horrible things happened to Kazemi under the reign of Khatami, who was known as a reformist. There is a good possibility that he was not aware of the details of what was being done to Kazemi in Evin, but I have no doubt that he was very well aware of the fact that political prisoners were brutally tortured in Iran's prisons. However, he didn't do anything about it, because he was a part of the system.

After Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the president of Iran and promised to take the country back to the true values of the Islamic revolution of 1979. Human Rights Watch reports that during his presidency, the treatment of political prisoners in Iran's prisons had worsened. Also, he forced many veteran university professors into retirement and replaced them with young professors who were supposed to be closer to Islamic values. Human Rights Watch has also reported that Ahmadinejad's government has no tolerance for peaceful protests and gatherings. Ahmadinejad has been a great supporter of Iran's nuclear program and has insisted that Iran is not building a nuclear bomb and has the right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Despite Ahmadinejad's vocal support for the program, the office of the Iranian president is not responsible for nuclear policy in Iran, but the Supreme National Security Council is in charge of the nuclear program. The council includes two representatives appointed by the Supreme Leader, military officials, and members of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government. It reports directly to Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons in 2005. Khamenei usually refrains from speaking in public but has criticized Ahmadinejad's comments on the nuclear issue. In October 2005, at a conference titled "World without Zionism," Ahmadinejad said that Israel had to be "wiped from the map." Later, translators argued that the correct translation of what Ahmadinejad had said was that Israel had to be "wiped away from the page of time." One way or another, Ahmadinejad has become quite well known for his stand against Israel and his calling the Holocaust a myth.

By studying Iran's history since the early 1900s, it is not difficult to observe that Iran is a country that is suffering from the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the trauma that has caused this condition continues. During the last few months, I have been researching the effects of torture and trauma especially on children, and I have come to

learn that PTSD can entirely disrupt an individual's life and change the way they see themselves and the world. When I was released from Evin Prison after more than 2 years, the first night I was home, I sat at the dinner table with my parents and watched in astonishment as they talked about the weather. At that time, I wasn't exactly ready to speak about all the terrible things that had happened to me in the prison and all I had witnessed, but I was looking for a sign that would tell me that when I was ready, people would like to know. However, this sign never came, and I got the message that I had to put it behind me, forget, and move on. And this was exactly what I did, or it would be much more correct to say that this was exactly what I tried to do. I put my trauma in a bubble, put the bubble on my shoulder, and walked through my life. I avoided anything that threatened this bubble to burst, including love and hatred. I got married and had children, but I never felt much until March 2000, just after my mother's funeral when something happened that made my bubble burst in my face, and, as a result, I came face to face with my past and the person it had made me. I realized that I had lived a lie since I was released from prison and had created a false self and had lived a false life.

I believe it would be logical to say that Iran's bubble has to burst, and it has to burst on its own and not through foreign intervention. I'm sure that as you read some of Iran's history during the last few pages, you have come to see that, sooner or later, foreign intervention leads to catastrophe. It is different, for example, when a country falls into civil war and the United Nations has to move in to save lives. When I speak of foreign intervention, I speak of the kind of action that led to the coup against Mosaddeq, or more recently, the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Bombing Iran would be the wrong way to burst the bubble. Democracy is not a sudden event; it is a long process which cannot be rushed. In a way, Iran has had to go all the way back and replay the parts of its history from which it had been robbed. The way Reza Shah pushed Iranians and made the women take off their hejabs and tried to take religion out of people's lives when they were not ready for it was doomed to have severe consequences, which we witnessed after the Islamic revolution. Recently with all the rhetoric from the Bush administration against Iran, Iranians cannot help but to feel cornered and on the defensive. Iran was in war with Iraq for 8 years, and Ayatollah Khomeini tried to topple Saddam, but he failed. Then, a few years later, in 2003, the U.S. entered Iraq and got rid of Saddam, but it got tangled in a never-ending conflict that turned Iraq into rubble and killed thousands of innocent Iraqis. Who is the winner of this terrible war? In my humble opinion, it is the Iranian regime, because with Saddam gone, they have tried to encourage an Islamic Republic in Iraq, which is the only other country with a majority Shia population in the region, and if this becomes reality, it could turn Iran into a huge power in the region. Actually, the U.S. invasion of Iraq greatly damaged the opposition in Iran, as now anyone who criticizes the Iranian regime is accused of asking for a U.S. invasion of Iran and working for the CIA. So one of the undisputable side effects of this war has been the strengthening of the government of Iran.

Now I can go back to the question that this essay has been trying to answer: is democracy possible in Iran? Yes, it is. For many years, the people of Iran have wanted democracy, but they have been sabotaged not only by foreign powers but also by their own leaders. Now, the only way to find democracy would be to allow it to complete its process. And this process can speed up if the people of Iran take a hard look at their history, acknowledge and study its horrors, and try to learn from it. Even though

foreigners have intervened in our affairs, we cannot throw all the responsibility onto their shoulders.

The opposition in Iran is scattered and disorganized. Most opposition groups hang on to old ideologies that have become obsolete, and they refuse to see that an ideology driven leadership is not what the country needs. We need a government with strong ethical codes to protect all Iranians, including minorities, and in order to have such a government, we need a constitution that can support it. But how can we get there? I think the first step would be dialogue between the different factions of the opposition and finding common ground. During the last years, we have made many mistakes and we need to learn from them. The next step would be informing the young generation of Iran. The new generation has always lived under the propaganda of the Islamic republic and has been taught a very distorted version of history. Iran is a very young country, and many of its young people have access to the internet, which can be used to get them the information they need to understand their own country and the world. And I just take this opportunity to say that I hope that the Obama administration would put a stop to the fear mongering policies that have defined the U.S. foreign policy for the last 8 years. Encouraging a reformist government in Iran could mean that protests can actually happen and maybe lead to more freedom, and this process could lead to more and more changes in the long run. Violence should remain the last resort in bringing democracy to Iran. Enough innocent people have died. Mahatma Ghandi led his country to independence through non-violent civil disobedience, and if this was possible in India, it is also possible in Iran.

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