

Human Rights in the Two Irans

BY RHONDA BROWN

A comparison of conditions in Iran in the last years of Pahlavi control and in the first year of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic government illustrates nothing better than the difficulties inherent in governing a developing nation as diverse as Iran despite a leader's good intentions. A review of State Department reports on human rights in Iran for 1977 and 1978, in conjunction with the observations of private groups monitoring basic rights, indicates that the country was then in a period of transition. In response to international and domestic pressure the shah's extremely authoritarian administration had initiated the first series of measures aimed at ultimately liberalizing the nation's political climate. Ironically, these very reforms aided the shah's opposition in mounting the challenge that drove him from power in January, 1979.

The insidious activities of the shah's thirty thousand-member secret police, SAVAK, have been widely reported. In 1977, however, the Department of State received "significantly fewer" allegations of torture than in previous years. Amnesty International, long critical of official repression in Iran, did not even mention torture in its annual report for 1977. The chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) stated in October, 1977, that his organization was not aware of any cases of torture in the past ten or eleven months. In the same year, at the suggestion of the Iranian Government, the International Committee of the Red Cross and foreign journalists inspected Iranian prisons for the first time. The shah told Amnesty International in March that he was willing to consider suggestions about how judicial procedures might be improved.

A series of amnesties in 1977 and 1978 meant the release of thousands of political prisoners. Nearly all the prisoners known to Amnesty International had been released by the time the shah left Iran. Reforms were undertaken in the military judicial system, which handled cases dealing with state security. These measures were viewed with "cautious optimism" by the ICJ representative. Other civil and criminal cases were tried in civilian courts, with civil rights fully guaranteed.

Many of these attempts at liberalization broke down

in late 1978 as the control exercised by the central government eroded in the face of widespread opposition from the populace. Nevertheless, the government dismissed more than thirty senior SAVAK officials, partially in response to reports that the use of torture, prohibited by the shah in 1976, was continuing. The range of reforms attempted by the Pahlavi regime persuaded Freedom House to change Iran's 1977 rating of "not free" to "partly free" in its 1978 assessment of world freedom.

REVOLUTION AND RETRIBUTION

Information on human rights under the Ayatollah Khomeini is by no means complete, but a combination of journalistic and academic accounts and the reports of the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International provides a picture of life in Iran since the installation of the new regime. Of particular interest, of course, is the response of the new government to its critics and opponents.

Retribution for the excesses of the shah and SAVAK was swift. The State Department believes that as many as fifteen thousand people were arrested in 1979, most for former association with the shah. Revolutionary tribunals were set up to try the cases of prominent military and political officials. These trials were conducted in secret and the accused had no right to defense counsel or appeal. Over seven hundred people were executed by firing squad in 1979. The trials and executions were denounced internationally, but on April 1 Khomeini said that "Trying a criminal is something contrary to human rights...all one need do with criminals is to establish their identity and they should be killed straight away." He declared a partial amnesty in July, and the executions of former officials declined. The number of people executed for counterrevolutionary or anti-Islamic crimes (alleged prostitutes, homosexuals, and drug dealers) remained high.

There have been reports of floggings, beatings, and psychological abuse carried out by revolutionary committees in Teheran and in the countryside. Most serious is a British journalist's report that SAVAK has been replaced by a new secret police with a similar name, SAVAME (the word "country" having been substituted for "nation"). Allegedly, some members of the SAVAK counterespionage group were asked to return to work.

For the masses in Iran, however, the climate is far freer than under the shah's rule. The prohibitions

against liquor, music, and certain types of sexual behavior have largely affected the middle class. Police harassment has ended too, and, for most, so has fear of the secret police.

The shah's tenure was marked by ambitious economic plans. Two-thirds of the budgetary outlays of the 1970s went for economic development and social welfare programs. These included a land reform program that benefited one-third of Iran's population directly and perhaps as many as 30 per cent indirectly. There was a program of profit-sharing for industrial workers and a literacy corps that taught two million Iranians how to write. Education was free through high school. Doctors and nurses were provided in rural areas, and in the fifteen years prior to 1977 life expectancy rose from forty-one to fifty-three years.

The 1973 boost in oil prices provided Iran with enormous financial revenues. Although the Ayatollah Khomeini has accused the shah of giving Iran's oil away, in fact it was sold at ever higher prices. By 1978 per capita income was \$2,400. The distribution of this wealth, however, was grossly unequal. Concentrated in the cities, an estimated 20 per cent of the population controlled nearly 65 per cent of the wealth. Emphasis on rapid industrialization had resulted in a decline in agricultural productivity, which further widened the disparity between rural and urban areas. Corruption was endemic and inflation ran at 50 per cent. The inability of the shah's ambitious economic program to achieve the level of popular expectation contributed significantly to the success of the opposition.

The Khomeini government has publicly committed itself to improving health care, educational opportunities, and access to housing. It also advocates the revitalization of agriculture and the reduction of economic disparity. However, in August, 1979, the *New Statesman* quoted a pro-Islamic Iranian journalist as saying that for the poor the only tangible benefit of the revolution thus far was a supply of electricity provided free of charge under a hundred kilowatts. In December, 3 million of the 8 million-member workforce were unemployed. In fact, thousands of skilled workers have left Iran, as many as 17,000 in the last quarter of 1979 alone.

THE WAY IT WAS

Economic frustrations drove thousands to the streets in late 1978 and provided a difficult test for the shah's program of civil and political liberalization. The very existence of SAVAK had curbed much discussion of politics, and advocacy of communism and criticism of the monarchy or of the governmental system were directly prohibited. Still, foreign publications, some critical of the shah, were available in Iran throughout 1977 and 1978. In addition, several royal commissions and inspectorates had been activated and frequently criticized governmental performance—often on government-controlled television. The press reported on waste and corruption, and throughout the first three-quarters of 1978 newspapers were allowed far greater editorial freedom than in the past.

In 1976 the shah formed a single political party, Resurgence, the only one allowed to operate in Iran

until August, 1978. Women were given the right to vote and religious minorities were permitted to practice their faiths openly and to participate fully in civil affairs during most of the shah's reign.

Restrictions of freedom of assembly were to apply to those advocating subversion, violence, or communism. In practice they were most strictly applied on university campuses, and this led to violent clashes between students and the security police that grew in number and intensity in the last quarter of 1978.

The regime that replaced the shah initially broadened the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly, but by August a new press law had been promulgated that prohibited criticism of religious and political leaders. Forty-one newspapers were closed and, subsequently, many foreign correspondents were expelled for critical coverage of events in Iran. In December, 1979, *World Press Review* noted that many Iranian newspapers were practicing self-censorship to avoid losing their licenses.

Khomeini has given assurances to most religious minorities that their rights will be protected. These guarantees do not, however, apply to the Bahais, who, Khomeini has said, have no place in an Islamic Republic. On July 21 the ayatollah announced that "Islamic tenets must be carried out throughout the country; all strata of the people must become Islamic." Thousands of Jews have left Iran, apparently uncertain of their status. The legal rights of women have been curtailed, and the ethnic minorities in the north and southwest have clashed with government troops in a bid for autonomy denied them by the new constitution.

Khomeini banned opponents of the Islamic republic from contesting the presidential election in January. Ballots in the earlier constitutional referendum were colored differently for yes and no. Voters allegedly were required to sign their ballots and were subject to other pressures. Advocacy of communism remains proscribed in Iran, and the ayatollah announced in April the leadership's intent to "strengthen the committees and the revolutionary guards until the government becomes powerful...so that nowhere in the country are there Communists or factions which are harmful to Islam." Some of those imprisoned for opposition to the shah and subsequently released have found themselves in prison again for opposition to the new rule.

Khomeini has turned out to be, as he predicted on *Face the Nation* in January, 1979, "the strongman of Iran." The shah defended his autocracy as necessary, stating in an interview with Oriana Fallaci: "Believe me, when three-quarters of the nation doesn't know how to read and write, you can provide reforms only by the strictest authoritarianism—otherwise you get nowhere."

To suggest that the people of Iran have merely replaced one tyranny with any other would be inaccurate. The present regime enjoys widespread public support that the shah did not have. The ayatollah's government seems truly committed to its vision of a humane, albeit puritanical, society. In order to curb those with an opposing vision, however, it has resorted to some of the methods that the shah found successful for so long. **WV**