

Domestic Opponents Patronised; Muscles Flexed Abroad

Two years ago, in a quiet and little noticed announcement, the Shah effectively turned his back on Islam as the basis of his regime. The announcement, replacing the Muslim Hegira calendar with one based on the classical Persian Imperial calendar of Cyrus the Great, was one of a series of steps in which the Shah has tried to find a new basis for modern Iran.

The Shah is a ruler in search of a new political and social identity that should suit his grand designs for his nation - in short a new ideology for a potential super-power.

Why Dropping the Islamic Base. There are many reasons why the Shah should not regard Islam as a basis for such an ideology. He contrasts the splendor and vigour of the Achaemenid and Sassanid Emperors with the apathetic and submissive state of Persia in Muslim times.

In particular, he considers the Shia religious order of modern Iran - mainly the Ayatullahs of Qom - to exert a baleful influence on their congregations, and argues that the Shia order has become a barrier between the Ruler and his people.

That the Shah's current suppression of the Ayatullahs should affect Iran's position in the Middle East or its relations with the neighbouring Muslim states is a problem already tackled by the Shah's numerous emissaries and well understood by Mr. Sadat of Egypt, the Baathist rulers of Iraq (I.E. June 19), the rulers of Saudi Arabia (I.E. June 26), and the Kings of Morocco and Jordan. To them all, the Shah's clamp down is a simple case of dealing with "Islamic Marxists" - or "the Black menace", as the Shah occasionally prefers to call his religious foes, or "some mad mullahs."

The Shah and President Sadat are in agreement on comparing this blocking role of the Ayatullahs with that of the old guard Nasserite "power centres" in Egypt whom Mr. Sadat accuses of standing as a barrier between him and the people.

A 'Unifying' Force. The Shah seeks especial inspiration from the career of Cyrus the Great who began as the Prince of a small Persian state and ended as the ruler of an Empire in which external conquests were mirrored by internal regimentation. This regimentation did not necessarily prevent individuals proving their qualities; but it did prevent fragmentation of political power. The Shah believes that Islam, and in particular the present Shia order, is hampering individual enterprise, while fragmenting power between different communities under the influence of different Ayatullahs (see below).

Three weeks ago, when the Shah said "I will not allow this country to be partitioned again", he was alluding to this fragmentation of power and to the fact that Ayatullah influence means that the Shah's writ does not automatically run in all parts of Iran.

The Shah believes that if the Ayatullahs were to succeed in reviving the 1906 constitution, which laid down that the Shah reigns but does not rule and requiring a committee of five Ayatullahs to make sure parliamentary legislation adheres to the precepts of Islam, then Iran would split into several parts, each controlled by different groups of the Shia order.

Like Cyrus the Great, the Shah sees himself the unifying force of a great Empire. His son, Crown Prince Reza, who he now calls Cyrus, is already being imbued with martial thinking to groom him for a career no less significant in the Shah's mind than that of his illustrious namesake. Prince Reza is to be trained in the United States as an Air Force pilot. Subsequently, he will be trained as a Navy commander.

Charting a New Course with a New 'Elite'. The Shah's grand design for Iran to become the world's 5th or 6th super-power envisages the emergence of a new elite, comprising several groups - not just Shia Muslims. He is thus promoting Bahais, Zoroastrians, Jews as well as Shia Muslims who have broken with the Ayatullahs.

Parsis "Calendar" was already in application, that the belligerent Ayatullahs of Qom caught the full drift of the Shah's thinking. More Bahais were brought to power and, indeed, Premier Hoveida was on August 15 replaced by a fellow Bahai, Dr. Jamshid Amouzegar, while he became Minister of Court; in June alone over 200 Parsi families arrived to settle and thus exercise their "right of return" from several centuries of self-exile in India.

The Ayatullahs have been carefully studying the Shah's moves since he celebrated in 1979 the supposed 2,500th anniversary of the ancient Achaemenid Empire. Two years later, the Shah's previously symbolic revival of the Zoroastrian faith took more concrete shape with the arrival of Indian Parsis to run newly established Zoroastrian temples. Some 12,000 of them have migrated from India, mainly from Gujerat, to Iran where they can now worship in those temples - and to act as a catalyst for a Zoroastrian revival.

These migrants, seen as the forerunners of a general Parsi return to Persia, are divided in (two main groups) The rich bourgeois merchants of Bombay, arriving with their fortunes intact, are being offered high positions in industry and finance, while the poorer migrants form a new agricultural cadre on land which the Ayatullahs consider to be Muslim property. The Shah is believed anxious to secure the return of up to 100,000 Parsis (a name which means "Persians") over the next decade.

The Bahais. Somewhat like the Parsis, the Bahai community in Iran considers itself as "the Shah's chosen people." It is a relatively small neo-Islamic community, founded at the turn of the century with a base still operating in Tel Aviv, numbering about 800,000 people in Iran. About 400,000 Bahais live in various parts of the world, mainly in the United States, South America and Europe and in Israel.

In Iran, the Bahais form an elite of politicians, civil administrators, army commanders, as well as intellectuals, financiers, merchants and industrialists. They are the creme of high society; but they seldom associate themselves with any opposition group and are rarely involved in anything that the Shah might consider "dishonourable."

(The Bahais, believed to be the most liberal group in the Middle East, were once listed by the Arab Boycott-Israel Office as allies of Zionism. It was after President Sadat's intensive lobbying in 1975 that the Boycott Office was prevented from putting them on the Arab blacklist).

The Jews. The Jewish community in Iran is prosperous, numerous and, indeed, almost as powerful as the Bahais. But like the Bahais, Jewish figures seldom reveal or abuse their powers, which are concentrated on trade, finance and industry.

The Jewish community is said to number about 22,000 - a major part of which having also acquired Israeli citizenship and practically living in both countries. They have established a booming channel of trade with Israel. Their intellectuals are very active in the universities and in the mass media, and form the backbone of Iran's growing class of scientists.

Other minorities, such as Armenians, Chaldeans and other small Christian groups are, likewise, favoured by the Shah and enjoy his protection.

With the help of these and loyal Shia groups - all forming his elite - the Shah is charting a course for Iran in which the Ayatullahs become totally irrelevant. Socially, this elite should spread numerically and geographically to all parts of Iran to rouse the people from their "Islamic lethargy" to a new way of life based on equal rights for women. Economically, the elite should turn the Iranians into a consumer society, introducing them into the modern luxuries that provoke them to work harder in order to spend more. Politically, however, the scheme is far more complex than many had thought.

The oil bonanza of 1973/74 came at the right time, about 10 years after the Shah had declared his "White Revolution", to finance his planned super-state. Over \$20 billion of annual oil revenues went almost exclusively to the sectors of economy, defence and social development. By 1975, GDP rose to \$56.8 bn, for a population of about 34.5 million. Total armed forces increased to about 300,000 (now estimated to total over 345,000, plus reserves put at 350,000). By 1977-78, defence expenditure reached 562.48 billion rials a year (about \$7.9 bn). - 14% of Total GDP

The 1973/74 oil events had strengthened the Shah's resolve that the course he was charting for "Greater Iran" was irreversible, and that "the Shia knot" around his people, which he had been trying to untie since 1963, had to be cut. Regional and international circumstances were not conducive to a shock treatment, however. He was advised to restructure his political system before cutting the religious cord around the people - to use the phrase of one former adviser to the Shah.

In 1975 the Shah made his major political move. He created Rastakhiz, as a ruling party grouping all existing legal parties, to channel the energies and ambitions of his people into a single direction under his control (see following page).

Apathy & Cynicism. What he found was that the people lacked energy, had only limited ambition and wanted cheaper food - more than politics. He did not find the vigour and drive he considered responsible for ancient Persian glories. People were either apathetic to politics, or cynical. In most cases cynicism towards the government had the mechanics of a religious discontent. In some cases, particularly among the younger intelligentsia, cynicism was the fruit of Communist indoctrination. Kurds and Arabs stuck to ethnic ideals.

Instead of blaming all this on lack of freedoms, poor diet and economic mismanagement as well as Islam, the Shah ascribed it almost solely to submissiveness inculcated by the Islamic Sharia or by Marxist ideology.

Rastakhiz was meant to permeate all sections of Iranian society, initially to act as a sounding board for the popular will, to relay popular thoughts, desires and discontents to the government, and potentially to become a truly mass party. Instead it became an empty bureaucratic machine, devoid of ideas and commanding little or no public enthusiasm. The Shah blamed this failure mainly on his "lazy" commissars. He did concede, however, but only in private discussions with his advisers, (that the fault might just happen to lie with the Shah himself, thinking in highly cultured and complex historical terms which were way above the simple politico-religious philosophy of the Iranian peasant.)

When his new government, under Dr. Amouzegar, told them to talk freely - expecting "constructive criticism" or hopes of a glorious future - all the Shah got was simple answers: "Down with the Shah", as their Ayatullahs had told them to say, or "Give us more bread". More intelligent men simply kept their mouth shut. To most planners in Rastakhiz, popular silence implied consent. But the Shah knew the eloquence behind that silence: full submission to God, the Allah who is Greater than all men and who, alone, should settle accounts with the Shah. But this is only one part of the truth. A big section of the silent majority backs the Shah's "liberation of the human intellect", his reforms granting equal rights to women, and the distribution of vast (and mostly idle) mosque lands among his landless subjects.

The Shia Order & Powers. The order of Shia clergymen, well organised since the early days of the Islamic renaissance in Persia, has been the key to power or loss of power for almost all Kings and local Princes since the 17th century. Leaders of this order, known as Ayatullahs, were the real power behind most rulers. They were the ones who had helped Gen. Reza, father of the present Shah, to unify the country and found the Pahlavi dynasty.

The order was so powerful then, with its mosques owning about 50% of Iran's lands and appreciative bazaar property, that Reza Shah in 1907 was compelled to observe the Constitution that was laid down a year earlier. The Ayatullahs were the main authors of that constitution, upholding Islam as the religion of the state. The law was based on the precepts of Islam - the Sharia - and both the legislative and executive arms of the state were to act accordingly. There was one particular clause requiring a committee of five Ayatullahs to supervise the works of the legislature and the government and to see to it that legislation fully adhered to the Sharia precepts.

*based on French system*

The Shia order was thus proclaimed the custodian of the faithful as well as the censor of the regime; and the King should reign and not rule.

That clause was never observed. Reza Shah lost the throne. His son, Mohammed, was brought to succeed him and to reign with "the help and guidance" of the Shia order. Mohammed, too, did not observe that clause. When, in 1950, it became clear to his Prime Minister, Mossadegh, that he wanted to rule, to introduce a centralised democracy under his control and with the backing of the Western powers, irrespective of the constitution, the Ayatullahs declared open war on him as well as his Western supporters. The Shia order backed Mossadegh's "National Front" and joined the Prime Minister in leading an Islamic nationalist movement supported by Moscow. The Shah was deposed. In 1951 Mossadegh nationalised the British-led oil industry. But in the ensuing super-power struggle for influence, culminating in Moscow supporting Mossadegh's efforts to break a Western oil blockade around Iran, the Shia order was split. The faction of Ayatullahs that feared Soviet, i.e., "atheistic", domination of Iran and a possible partitioning of the nation between Moscow and the West, backed the Shah's return to Tehran and the overthrow of Mossadegh. In return, the Shah made a vague pledge to observe the constitution.

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It was only until mid-1963 that the pro-West faction of the Shia order realised the "mistake of supporting a man who was bent on undermining the very foundations of Islam." That was the comment of Ayatullah (also called Ruhallah) Al Khoumaini, the chief mulla of Qom, after the bloody events of June 5th, when the bazaars (commercial centres) of Tehran, Tabriz, Qom, Yazd and other major cities rose to protest the Shah's "White Revolution."

To the Shia order, the White Revolution had many dangerous implications: 1 - Giving equal rights to women meant undermining the man-based Koranic family unit; 2 - State-sponsored education of prostitutes, particularly state-financed houses for retired prostitutes wishing to marry and return to normal family life, meant undermining the moral precepts of the order; 3 - Distribution of mosque lands to the peasants and poor urban dwellers wanting to resettle in state-sponsored agricultural colonies meant that the Shia order was being stripped of the very basis of its power.

The riots of June 5, 1963, were well organised by some 100,000 Mullas (preachers) of the Shia order, led by a triumvirate of three Ayatullahs at Qom - one of the holiest Muslim cities in Iran. The mullas mobilised the population throughout the country. The chief militant of the triumvirate, Khoumaini, issued the slogan "Down with the Pahlavis." But the Shah's SAVAK was far more powerful, with over 200,000 secret agents led by Gen. Nassiri, who had played a key role in the struggle with Mossadegh and the Shah's triumphant comeback in the early 1950s. Khoumaini was defeated and had to flee to Kerbala in neighbouring Iraq. The opposition movement was crushed. But the Shah's Revolution could not whitewash the bloody image of the regime in subsequent years; and in the eyes of the world public opinion the Ayatullahs' role in the anti-Shah nationalist movement had far more sympathy than the regime's SAVAK.

Political Reforms; Advent of Rastakhiz. In the early 1970s, however, world politics and the exigencies of detente between the US and USSR took precedence over methods of internal rule. With the rise of oil power in 1973, the Nixon Doctrine (see following pages) gave the Shah an important regional role.

Under the Nixon Doctrine, the Shah assumed the role of policeman for the Middle - East oil reservoir. Public opinion was more interested in the way Iranian troops were crushing a Marxist rebellion in Oman than in the exploits of urban guerrillas inside Iran. Urban guerrillas, totalling around 500 at the most, according to government estimates, were either members of the banned Communist Tudeh Party or followers of the Ayatullah-backed Marxist "liberation front." Thus guerrillas were described by the state as "Communist terrorists" or "Islamic Marxist terrorists." Hence the confusion about the real identity of the Shah's opponents.

The Opposition. There are, in fact, 7 opposition groups active in Iran since the 1950s; and five of these are militant with "military wings" manned by urban guerrillas. The latter five are: Tudeh; the Front for the Liberation of Iran, which is backed by the Ayatullahs of Qom; the Front for the Liberation of Arabistan (an Arab ethnic group wanting independence for its oil-rich southern province); the National Front of Mossadeghists, led by Darioush Forouhar; and "The Bloc of Iranian Mujahidin (struggling) Clergymen." The latter group is said to include about 12,000 well trained mullas, armed and financed by Libya. Some of the other militant groups are also said to have been armed and financed by Libya and trained by the Palestinian PFLP in Southern Lebanon.

The non-militant opposition groups are the Human Rights Committee of Dr. Karim Sanjabi; and the Iranian National Party, founded in 1941 and led by Mr. Muhsin Beseshkebour. The INP had joined Rastakhiz in 1975. But on June 18, this year, it withdrew from Rastakhiz declaring that the latter had lost its authority. There are, indeed, several other parties, with the leaders of some of them still in parliament; but these have either quietly dissolved themselves or frozen their activities, or joined Rastakhiz.

Breaking Cycle of Violence & a Game of Wits. The basic precepts of the Nixon Doctrine, however, were overshadowed by President Carter's human rights campaign - launched in Washington since the first days of Carter in office in 1976. The Shah was compelled to introduce reforms to accommodate Carter's basic conditions for maintaining Washington's special relationship with Tehran: human rights. Premier Hoveida had to go and be replaced by a young, more liberal figure, Dr. Amouzegar, who was also appointed as Secretary General of Rastakhiz. The cabinet reshuffle in August 1977 was meant to be only one step towards the promised reforms.

But already since June 1977, opponents like Sanjabi, Forouhar and Dr. Shah-pour Bakhtiar (of the powerful Bakhtiar Tribe, to which former Empress Soraya belongs), began publishing "open letters", some addressed to the government and some to the Shah in person. Those letters were signed by a number of middle class intellectuals as well as former aides to Mossadegh and prominent jurists. In one of them, addressed to the Shah by Sanjabi, Forouhar and Dr. Bakhtiar, the Emperor was told: "...The only way to create new faith in ourselves, to restore a sense of individual liberty and a spirit of national co-operation in order to come to terms with the problems threatening Iran is to end despotic government, observe the principles of the (1906) constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, forego a one party system, allow freedom of the Press and of association, release political prisoners, permit exiles to return and establish a Government based on (Shia) majority representation..."

The letter put the old Hegira year date, implying a rejection of the monarchic calendar introduced by the Shah in 1976. Two months earlier, in May 1977, a letter sent to the Rastakhiz leadership expressed the mood of cynicism towards the regime: "The majority either do not speak, or if they do, they do not speak the truth."

When in June this year Premier Amouzegar announced a set of reforms, including an overhauling of Rastakhiz and strict orders for the authorities not to use violence against demonstrators, Mr. Farouhar said: "But you cannot call this a return to freedom. It is merely a tactical change."

(To be continued next week)