Introduction

The Islamic Revolution that took place in Iran in 1979 is often viewed in the Anglophone world with a mixture of contempt and confusion underscored by an aura of unfamiliarity. It stands seemingly alone as a revolution that took a country into the throngs of religiosity and put under question the Marxian notion of revolution as the culmination of class struggle. This paper seeks to demistify such phenomena by bridging the gap between a class-based conception of revolution and the role of religion in causing the 1979 Revolution. I will be examining the success of protest in Iran in relation to two factors: 1) the support of the peasantry, and 2) the support of the religious clergy or Ulama. As such, this paper seeks to address the following question: why did protests against the monarchy fail to yield a significant impact throughout the late Qajar Dynasty yet succeed in 1979? More specifically, I would like to address how the level of support among the peasantry and the Ulama made it possible for the 1979 Revolution to overthrow the monarchy despite prior failures in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The peasantry is defined here as the portion of the population who are neither royal, nor aristocratic nobility, nor business owners, whilst the Ulama are the religious clergy and scholars. Mirroring the two-pronged nature of this study, there are two substantial sections to this paper. The first section focuses on the role of class relations in determining the outcome of contentious events in Iran, analyzing the importance of the peasantry to the success of acts of contentious politics through a Marxian lens. In the second portion of the paper, I focus specifically on the role of the Ulama in providing a
mobilizing structure for acts of contentious claim-making in the context of Iran, drawing largely on Charles Tilly’s conceptualization of protest. As such, I argue that while both featured acts of contentious claim-making against the monarchy, a realignment in the support of the peasantry and the Ulama enabled the 1979 Revolution to succeed in abolishing the monarchy whereas similar contentious action under the late Qajar dynasty failed.

Methodology: Marx, Tilly, and Contentious Claim-Making

As discussed, the first section of this paper will analyze the peasantry’s role in contentious claim-making in Iran in the context of class warfare from a Marxian lens, conceptualizing history in terms of class conflict. The traditional Marxian view of history is centred on the notion that industrialization is accompanied and driven by a successful “Bourgeois revolution” that is subsequently followed by a successful “Proletarian revolution.” In the Iranian context, however, bourgeois acts of contentious claim-making against the aristocracy at the dawn of industrialization were only partially successful. In the aftermath of the First World War, the 1921 Persian Coup d’État saw the Qajar Dynasty overthrown. While the initial goal of the Coup was to install a republic, the peasantry’s demand for the maintenance of a monarchical state as opposed to a republic led to the installation of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The second portion of this paper, analyzing the role of the Ulama, is rooted in Charles Tilly’s conceptualization of protest and revolutionary politics as acts of contentious claim making wherein parties make “claims that bear on” the interests of other parties. This section centres on the unique role historically played by the Ulama in providing the structure for contentious episodes and performances to be executed, as Amina Elbendary outlines in the context of the Middle East and as Ervand Abrahamian does so in the specific context of Iran. The analysis in these two portions of this paper yield two important and interconnected findings. Firstly, that the success of acts of contentious claim-making in Iran has historically correlated with the support of the peasantry. Secondly, that the Ulama exercises significant influence over the success of such acts on account of organized religion’s role as the most important mobilizing structure for acts of contentious claim making in Iran. Through a mixture of a class-centric Marxian analysis of Iranian protest politics and an analysis of the role of religion as a pivotal mobilizing structure for acts of contentious claim-making in the country, I demonstrate that the support of the peasantry and the Ulama is crucial to the success of such acts. Thus, a shift in the sentiments of two segments of the populace is identified as the primary reason why the Revolution of 1979 succeeded while anti-Monarchist protests in the late Qajar Dynasty failed to establish a republic.

literature review

This analysis centres on three types of sources. Firstly, it draws on empirical data (i.e. the basic structure of events, and how different instances of contentious claim-making in Iran unfolded at the two time-periods in question) from authors such as Ervan Abrahamian, Jack Goldstone, Peter Seeberg, Theda Skocpol, and Karen Rasler. Secondly, in order to analyze the importance of the peasantry and the Ulama in determining the outcome of contentious claim-making, it evaluates the claims made by such sources as to the causes behind the success of the 1979 Revolution and the failure of what Abrahamian characterizes as pre-industrial protests that took place during the late Qajar Dynasty. Thirdly, it incorporates ideas on contentious claim-making and mobilizing structures drawn from Charles Tilly to analyse the structural role played by the Ulama in Iranian protest politics and class analyses outlined by the Marxist scholars such as Benno Teschke to analyze the importance of the role played by the peasantry. These three lines of research are used to substantiate the thesis that a realignment in the support of the peasantry and the Ulama ultimately enabled the 1979 Revolution to succeed in abolishing the monarchy where similar contentious action under the late Qajar dynasty had failed.

The literature on the role of the peasantry and the Ulama in Iranian protest politics has been construed in a multitude of ways by different scholars. Ervand Abrahamian, writing in the decade before the 1979 Revolution, describes the rise of class consciousness that accompanied the rise of wage labour in the aftermath of World War Two as a key distinction between Qajar-era and late 20th century protests. This notion places particular significance on the role of the peasantry, and specifically on the transformation of their interests as a result of the shift from rural and agricultural livelihoods to those of a rapidly industrializing nation's proletarian class. Abrahamian also gives significance to the role of the Ulama, noting that during the late Qajar dynasty, Ulama with ties to business interests in the bazaar (or marketplace) facilitated protests against the monarchy while those with royal ties facilitated counter-protests, placing the Ulama as integral to protest politics in the country. A competing view posited by Goldstone emphasizes the visionary leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Ulama as key to the success of those protests. This view, emphasizing the primacy of religious leadership, is partially supported by Goldstone’s observation that “Shah and Islam” counter-protests led by loyalist Ulama avoided the establishment of a republic after the 1921 Coup d’État. Seeberg, on the other hand, centres his argument for the success of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 on the diversion of the nation's wealth to classes who supported the Shah. Similarly, Rasler argues that the inconsistent use of repression and the allocation of concessions by the Pahlavi Dynasty in the run up to the Islamic Rev-


7 Ibid., 196.
olution can be credited with the regime’s downfall. Ultimately, scholars have come to a variety of conclusions on the topic. In analyzing the two factors outlined in the thesis, the support of the peasantry and that of the Ulama, this essay posits that a shift in these two factors between the late Qajar dynasty and the run up to the 1979 revolution explain why the latter successfully abolished monarchy whilst protests against the Shah during the late Qajar dynasty had little success in comparison.

The Support of the Peasantry

The first phenomenon this paper seeks to explore is the general realignment in the peasantry’s sentiments towards the monarchy between the end of the Qajar Dynasty and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The peasantry is that portion of the population which is neither royal, nor aristocratic nobility, nor business owners (i.e. the bourgeoisie). This section begins with an overview of the class transformation of the peasantry over the twentieth century before proceeding with an analysis of the development of what Skocpol terms a “rentier absolutist state” disconnected from its populace and aligned instead with “the rhythms of the world capitalist economy”. Ultimately, this section illustrates that the changing class dynamics caused by industrialization, combined with the rise of a rentier state disconnected from its citizenry and reliant instead on foreign actors expropriating resources, led to an ideological shift amongst the peasantry. Whereas early contentious action opposing monarchy in Iran during the late Qajar Dynasty was supported by the wealthy proto-bourgeoisie of Iran’s bazaars and opposed by the peasantry, the 1979 Revolution was supported by the newly proletarianizing peasantry and opposed by the bourgeoisie reliant on patronage from the Shah. In both eras, affirming the thesis, the support of the peasantry correlates with the success of protest in Iran.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, protests against the monarchy were commonly led by business-owners in the bazaar. Employees and apprentices of this early bourgeoisie were known to participate in such protests. However, the majority of the peasantry, a largely agricultural population at this time, opposed such pre-industrial anti-Monarchist protests out of “dislike for the wealthy in the bazaar” and saw little gain from what Abrahamian describes as a “revolution of shopkeepers, money-lenders, and merchants.” In more general terms, the peasantry saw no reason to support and were hostile to the build up towards a bourgeois revolution, defined by “growing class antagonism” between a rising bourgeois class and the nobility with the former intent on removing obstacles to capitalism. Consequently, when the prospect of the establishment of a republic emerged in 1924 as the Qajar Dynasty was formally deposed, monarchist crowds composed primarily of peasants took to

increasingly pro-Monarchist worldview as the Shah rewarded elites for their support by ensuring that they received a disproportionate and uneven amount of the wealth accumulated from the sale of national resources such as oil to the West. Thus, there was a reversal in the socio-economic makeup of supporters and opponents of the Monarchy. As a result of the Shah’s increasing foreign-alignment and the subsequent shift in the social base of monarchy supporters, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was largely supported by the newly proletarianized peasantry and opposed by the bourgeoisie. This contrasts with pre-industrial anti-Monarchist protests during the late Qajar Dynasty which were supported by wealthy business owners.

Over the next few decades, especially after the Second World War, the Iranian economy underwent significant industrialization. The major implication of industrialization for peasants was their proletarianization. The process of proletarianization meant a shift among the peasantry from rural and agricultural professions towards wage labour. As such, they began identifying their interests as distinctly class-based and at odds with the state—thus leading to the formation of trade unions that took an increasingly anti-Monarchist stance. The distinct class transformation engendered by the progressive proletarianization of the peasantry was further exacerbated by the development of what Skocpol terms a “rentier absolutist state” under which the government grew more reliant on exports and petrodollars for revenue than taxes levied on its own citizenry. This was characterized by the Shah increasingly aligning himself with Western nations interested in Iran’s resources, further alienating the increasingly proletarianized peasantry. At the same time, the bourgeoisie adopted an increasingly pro-Monarchist worldview as the Shah rewarded elites for their support by ensuring that they received a disproportionate and uneven amount of the wealth accumulated from the sale of national resources such as oil to the West. Thus, there was a reversal in the socio-economic makeup of supporters and opponents of the Monarchy. As a result of the Shah’s increasing foreign-alignment and the subsequent shift in the social base of monarchy supporters, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was largely supported by the newly proletarianized peasantry and opposed by the bourgeoisie. This contrasts with pre-industrial anti-Monarchist protests during the late Qajar Dynasty which were supported by wealthy business owners.

Ultimately, the evolution of contentious politics in Iran between the late Qajar dynasty and the decades leading up to the Revolution of 1979 was underpinned by the shift from business interests in the bazaar against the monarchy with peasants largely remaining loyal to the Shah to a situation in which a largely proletarianized peasantry supported contentious action against the Shah while bourgeois interests remained loyal. Over the course of the 20th century, opposition to the monarchy thus morphed from the project of wealthy business owners in the pre-industrial bazaar into a cause increasingly dominated by the proletarian masses. Furthermore, during the final days of the Monarchist regime, the Shah exacerbated tensions with the newly proletarianized peasantry by inconsistently and alternatingly rewarding them with con-

15 Abrahamian, “The Crowd In Iranian Politics 1905-1953,” 188.
cessions and using brutal force to suppress dissent.22 This change can be credited with enabling the success of contentious action in abolishing the monarchy in 1979 where it had failed to do so in the run up to the installment of Reza Khan as the Shah of Iran and attributed to changes in the economic interests of the (increasingly proletarianising and urbanising) peasantry and the increasingly foreign-aligned nature of the Shah and bourgeois classes’ economic interests. Thus, the support of the peasantry can be identified as an indispensable determinant of the success of an act of contentious claim making. Nevertheless, as Skocpol points out, for the grievances of the peasantry to manifest themselves in a coordinated manner, traditional institutions underpinning communal life in Iran (i.e. “networks of Islamic religious communication and leadership”) provided an equally indispensable mobilizing structure.23

The Support of the Ulama

The second factor examined in this essay is the role of the Ulama, and more generally that of Islam as a pervasive force in Iranian society, in enabling the success of protests and counterprotests. This section begins with a cursory overview of the significance of Islam, and by extension of the Ulama, in the Middle East as a region before narrowing to focus on Iran in particular. It then proceeds to address the role played by the Ulama in Iranian protest politics, identifying a shift from a fundamentally monarchist stance to a decisively republican one. Ultimately, this section demonstrates two distinct but deeply intertwined ideas. Firstly, the support (or opposition) of the Ulama is a vital factor in determining the success or failure of contentious claim making in Iran. Secondly, between the fall of the Qajar Dynasty (in 1924) and the fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty (in the 1979 Revolution), Iran’s Ulama, increasingly alienated by the policies of the Shah, underwent an ideological transition from being supportive of the institution of monarchy to seeking the establishment of an Islamic Republic.

A key defining characteristic of the Middle East is the extent to which religious officials (i.e. the Ulama) and the mosque as an institution have historically played a crucial role in the process of contentious claim-making in the region. As Elbendary asserts, the Ulama were relied upon as mediators both between the state and individuals and for private disputes across urban and rural settings alike, empowering them as crucial allies for the state in maintaining its power.24 Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s ruling house (the House of Saud) is dependent for its power on an alliance with the House of Shaykh, who dominate religious offices in the country by virtue of their descent from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi branch of Islam (Saudi Arabia’s state religion).25 As Gwenn Okruhlik points out, this alliance is an “uneasy symbiosis” between the two sides, with the former dependent on the latter for legitimacy.

23 Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution,” 271.
24 Elbendary, “Popular Politics in the Medieval Middle East,” 2
and the latter dependent on the former for power. During the late Qajar Dynasty (between the late 1800s and its overthrow in 1924), the monarchy similarly relied on the Ulama to bolster its legitimacy in the face of protests organized by dissatisfied merchants (a proto-bourgeoisie) in the bazaar. This took the form of the “Islam and Shah” movement led by state-sponsored Ulama, which centred on the idea that monarchy is essential for the preservation of Islam. Crucially, this provided a religious mobilizing structure in the form of what Abrahamian terms “Islam and Shah crowds” for the peasantry who saw little gain from a “revolution of shopkeepers, moneylenders, and merchants,” and when Reza Khan overthrew the Qajar Dynasty in the Coup d’État of 1924, it was ultimately “Islam and Shah crowds” that halted his plans for the formation of a republic and led to his establishment of the Pahlavi Dynasty. It is therefore clear that the Ulama and the mosque networks under their control have historically provided a pivotal mobilizing structure for the collective expression of contentious claims in Iran. However, during the last three decades of monarchy in Iran, the Shah pursued policies aimed at weakening the power of the Ulama in an attempt to centralize power and modernise the country.

While the Ulama were significant on both sides of anti-Monarchist protests throughout the late Qajar Dynasty (as discussed in the next paragraph), the majority of the religious establishment supported the “Islam and Shah” movement during the early 20th century in opposition to the establishment of a republic and in conjunction with the peasantry. However, during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Ulama not only supported but actively orchestrated protests against the Shah, viewing him as an obstacle to the preservation of Islamic values and too aligned with western interests. In essence, where the monarchist Ulama under the Qajar Dynasty were largely state-sponsored, the Pahlavi Dynasty did not maintain this type of relationship with the Ulama. Tilly characterizes protest politics in terms of contentious performances and episodes, which use tactical repertoires to make contentious claims. The role of Islam as a unifying element of Iran’s national identity means that the Ulama’s religious influence translates into influence over the mobilizing structure that dominates tactical repertoires in Iranian protest politics: organized religion. Consequently, this section illustrates that a shift in the allegiance of the Ulama, who, owing to their religious power, exercise significant influence over contentious claim making in Iran, directly impacted the outcome of the 1979 Revolution as compared to protests over the course of the late Qajar Dynasty.

As Abrahamian outlines, both protests against the monarchy as well as counterprotests supporting the monarchy

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28 Ibid., 195.
29 Ibid., 197.
30 Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution,” 274.
The Shah's association with Western interests weakened the Monarchy's role as a symbol of the nation's Islamic values, undermining the pro-Monarchist argument made decades earlier by Ulama leading "Islam and Shah" crowds.

In the decades leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a mixture of labour-oriented factions and religious organizations came to dominate the an-

37 Abrahamian, “The Crowd In Iranian Politics 1905-1953,” 188.
40 Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution,” 274.
41 Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution,” 274.
ti-Shah movement.\textsuperscript{42} By the 1970s, the support of the Ulama was decisively out of reach for the Shah, as the community of religious scholars led by Ayatollah Khomeini were at the forefront of the movement against the monarchy.\textsuperscript{43} The 1979 Revolution was a “synthesis of religion and political religion”\textsuperscript{44} with figures such as the Ayatollah Khomeini melding their religious influence with their resulting influence over contentious claim-making in Iran in order to overthrow the Pahlavi Dynasty and establish a Republic. Thus, a pivotal reason behind the Monarchy successfully being overthrown in 1979 was the support and intervention of the Ulama against the Shah.

Nevertheless, the idea that the Ulama’s realignment away from the state was driven solely by the Shah’s erosion of state sponsorship of the Ulama and socio-economic conditions overlooks the role of the very religious ideology the Ulama represent. As Mansour Moaddel argues, neither a structural analysis based solely on the organizational capabilities of the Ulama nor a traditional Marxian analysis driven solely by an understanding of class interests fully explains the active shift in the Ulama’s ideology between the end of the Qajar Dynasty and the 1979 Revolution.\textsuperscript{45} The “Islam and Shah crowds” led by the Ulama in defence of the monarchy during uprisings against the Qajar Dynasty represented an interpretation of Shia Islam that saw a strong Islamic monarchy as necessary for the preservation of the nation’s Islamic character.\textsuperscript{46} This is in line with the Akhbari school of Shia doctrine, which rejects the idea that the Ulama should play a role in judgement, jurisprudence, or governance.\textsuperscript{47} As Moaddel points out, the Akhbari school was displaced over the course of the twentieth century by the Usuli school, which assigns “the ulama the key role in the interpretation of law” and emphasises that followers of the faith should abide by the judgements of a “living mujtahid” (i.e. a learned member of the Ulama experienced in Islamic jurisprudence).\textsuperscript{48} Moaddel further asserts that the evolution of Shia doctrine amongst Iranian Ulama occurred as a direct result of “the dialectic between the state and its opponents” in the “broad episodic context” of Iranian protest politics over the course of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{49} In other words, the shift among the Ulama from supporting an Islamic monarchy to supporting an Islamic republic largely correlates with the doctrinal shift from the Akhbari to the Usuli school of Shia Islam, which itself was generated by the erosion of the state’s sponsorship of religion and its alliance with western actors identified with the exploitation of Iran’s resources.

Consequently, the support and allegiance of the Ulama in large part determined the success or failure of acts of contentious claim making against the

\textsuperscript{42} Abrahamian, “The Crowd In Iranian Politics 1905-1953,” 196.
\textsuperscript{46} Abrahamian, ”The Crowd In Iranian Politics 1905-1953,” 191.
\textsuperscript{47} Moaddel, “Ideology as Episodic Discourse: The Case of the Iranian Revolution,” 356.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 356
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 375.
Monarchy. The Ulama were not only essential to the preservation of Monarchy in Iran when Reza Khan attempted to establish a Republic during the 1924 Coup d’État, but were ultimately pivotal in the eventual abolition of Monarchy in Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. The Shah’s alienation of the Ulama combined with the aforementioned realignment of the peasantry’s interests against those of the Shah to enable the protests in 1979 to result in a revolutionary change in government where protests under the Qajar dynasty had failed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, changes in the support of the peasantry and the Ulama enabled the 1979 revolution to succeed in abolishing the monarchy where similar contentious action under the late Qajar dynasty failed. As demonstrated in my analysis of the influence of the Ulama and the role of the peasantry in determining the outcome of an act of contentious claim making, these two segments of society exercise great power in determining the success of such acts. The Ulama’s control over organized religion and the peasantry’s historic role in determining the outcome of such movements mean that without the support of these two elements of society, an act of contentious claim making is unlikely to succeed in Iran.

50 Abrahamian, “The Crowd In Iranian Politics 1905-1953,” 188.

Through an analysis of the role of both the Ulama and the peasantry, and synthesising scholarship on the role of both religious leadership and the changing class structures in Iran during the early twentieth century, I demonstrate that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was driven in equal parts by both factors of society. On one hand, I illustrate that the failure of the Pahlavi Dynasty to maintain the same ties of state sponsorship with the Ulama that characterized the Qajar Dynasty is largely to account for the shift amongst Ulama from a viewpoint centred on “Islam and Shah” monarchy (represented by the Akhbari school) to one centred on the establishment of an Islamic Republic (driven by the Usuli school). On the other hand, I demonstrate that the proletarianization of the Iranian population and the shift from loyalty to employers towards union structures resulted in alienation from a state dominated by the exploitation of resources for export by the Shah and elites. Expounding upon the significance of both, I illustrate that the role of the Ulama as community organizers stemming from the role of Islam in Iranian national identity positioned them as crucial organizers of contentious social movements in the country. Consequently, I affirm my thesis that a realignment in the support of the peasantry and the Ulama enabled the 1979 revolution to succeed in abolishing the monarchy whereas similar contentious action under the late Qajar dynasty failed.
Bibliography


