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Essays

Revolutions in History

Laina Farhat-Holzman

I saw the Iranian Revolution of 1979 up close and personally-- a revolution against a modernizing authoritarian king. I watched otherwise clever intellectuals deceive themselves that they would emerge the rulers of a democratic Iran, while the crafty theocrats waited in the wings to seize power. How could all these leftists be so naïve about how revolutions work? The trajectory of revolutions should be no mystery. Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution*¹ spelled it all out in 1952, and his observations have stood the test of time.

Of course, Brinton's big picture of the most consequential revolutions in history do not explore the revolutions that came after his death: the Islamist revivals, the "velvet" and color revolutions of Eastern Europe, and even Indonesia, which followed the Brinton models despite Indonesia's Muslim population. Nonetheless, most of Brinton's observations are valuable.

Brinton compared four major revolutions: the English Revolution of 1640 (they executed their king and established a 10-year religious dictatorship), the American Revolution of 1776, the French of 1789, and the Russian of 1917. Brinton's formula also applies to the Chinese 1949 Revolution, but not the Iranian Revolution, which occurred after his book was published. The American Revolution was the exception to the usual templates about revolutions, which is why it was less bloody and horrific than the others. It was the revolt of British settlers demanding representation in Parliament, not an overturning of a government. But for the rest, the following elements hold true:

- Revolutions in which an entire system of rule is replaced by another have happened only since the 17th century; before that, there were revolts, which were bloodily put down by the ruling class, or revolutions that replaced one dynasty with another, as we see in China.
- Revolutions do not occur when things are at rock bottom. Famines, plagues, and natural disasters contribute to unrest, but a revolution will not happen until a society perceives that progress has been thwarted by government incompetence. The danger is keenest when rising expectations are not met.

¹ Brinton, Crane (1952). *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Prentice-Hall.

- Revolutions do not come from the fringes—the far left or far right—they erupt from the literate intelligentsia, children from the middle class. When the intelligentsia of a country loses all respect for the country’s leadership, the groundwork is laid for ending the regime. The scholar who illuminated this process was Jacques Barzun, who wrote in his mid 90’s *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present*,² a tour de force trek through 500 years of Western cultural life.

I read this book in the late 1990s, and have watched our own country’s increasing ignorance of our basic governing institutions with anxiety. Teaching civics in public schools has largely disappeared, and in our recent election, when a populist and his followers showed disdain for the press, courts, or historic norms of behavior that have protected us from tyranny. Too often, the intelligentsia overlook movements roiling among average or less educated voters. Aside from the American Revolution, however, the other major revolutions have followed similar trajectories:

- Once autocratic leadership is removed, the intelligentsia are the next to be removed. A dictatorial cadre—from the fringes and often few in number—can take over a country. The Russian Revolution is a model of this process, as were the French, Chinese, and Iranian.
- Economic issues may start the revolution, but ideological fanaticism finishes it (the American and Indonesian being the exception).

Brinton did not live long enough to witness the Iranian Revolution, but his overview of widespread discontent, alienation of the aristocrats, and radicalization of the college students and professors all were issues he noted. But what was different with this revolution was that it was the first to actually reject modernization. It was a retreat to a religious past, a devolution, which attempted to undo all the modernization that had come from the Pahlavis.

² Barzun, Jacques (2000). . *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*. Harper.

In the summer of 1978, left-wing students, many of whom had returned from studying in the US and Europe, demonstrated in Iran's urban centers to bring down the Shah. The BBC radio and television broadcasts covered the demonstrations and appeared sympathetic to their cause.³ The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, never a decisive person, was secretly suffering from cancer, which weakened him, while his competent advisor and friend since childhood, Asadollah Alam, Prime Minister from 1962-64 and Court Minister from 1964-1978, died the year before the revolution, leaving the Shah without a rudder.⁴

Alam might have protected the Shah from his vacillation and uneven responses to the growing anarchy. When the Shah applied force to stop the demonstrations, the world press watched and condemned him. Thereafter, his response to events in the street were uneven and ineffectual. The mobs were emboldened.

The intellectuals found support from an unexpected ally: the Ayatollah Khomeini, the articulate cleric who had assumed leadership of the Iranian Shiite clergy and who had long defied the Shah's modernizations. He posed as a symbol of rectitude who just wanted to see the oppressive Shah brought down. The intellectuals were fooled into thinking that once the revolution succeeded, Khomeini would just be an honored elder who would retire from the fray.

In February 1979, the Ayatollah returned from exile in Paris and immediately established his headquarters in what had been a girls' school, evicting the occupants. Iranians were so euphoric about their revolution's success that no one reacted in a timely fashion to Khomeini's swift seizure of power. Khomeini immediately pushed for a referendum (again, before anyone had a chance to discuss this in the media) in which voters would say yes or no to an "Islamic Republic." The many revolutionary sectors had thought that they were getting an Iranian Republic, an idea encouraged by the Ayatollah himself. After he seized power, however, he acknowledged that lying in defense of Islam was more important than Muslims themselves, or Iran itself.

³ Many observers later documented the process of this revolution. Among them were: Farhat, Laina (2001) "Janus Blindsided: The Islamic Revolution," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 45: No. 45, Article 9. Raddi, Parviz C. (1983). *In the Service of the Peacock Throne: The Diaries of the Shah's Last Ambassador to London*, Hamish Hamilton, London. Shawcross, William (1988). *The Shah's Last Ride: The Fate of an Ally*. NY. Sick, Gary (1985). *All Fall Down*. Random House. Wilber, Donald N. (1981). *Iran Past and Present: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic: Ninth Ed*, Princeton University Press. Hoveyda, Fereydon (1979). *The Fall of the Shah*. Wyndham Books. Huysser, Robert E. (1986). *Mission to Tehran*. Harper & Rowe.

⁴ Alam, Asadollah (1991). *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969-1977*. Translated by Alinaghi Alikhani and Nicholas Vincent. St. Martin's Press.

Establishing his headquarters in the girls' school was his first message to women. The next was to have his religious police beat women demonstrating in the streets for not wearing headscarves (hijab). The women had believed that this rule was not ordered by the Ayatollah, but by his underlings, a mistaken notion quickly disabused by the beatings and arrests. This was followed by the first of hundreds of executions that began with the woman who had headed the new department of social services. Women judges were then fired and sent home.

He then held a referendum (not an election) that offered two choices: "yes" or "no" to a new religious constitution. With no press to illuminate this horror and no time for thought, the public voted yes. An entire program of social modernization painstakingly executed over the four decades of Pahlavi rule was trashed.

It is necessary to understand that despite the zeal of the masses who support these revolutions, revolutions and totalitarian dictatorships do not often have staying power. The initial headiness that begins them morphs into corruption and cynicism and violent repressions, which eventually breed backlashes. Studies suggest that most revolutions quickly go from anarchy to dictatorships.

The "Arab Spring" appears to be a revolution against the perennial authoritarianism of the Muslim World. The democratic revolution that idealists hoped for morphed instead into the default position of Muslim-majority countries: either military or religious-fanatic dictatorships.⁵ (Exceptions might be Tunisia, one of the more secular Muslim state and the overthrow of the Indonesian autocrat, Suharto.) Indonesia is always raised as an example of a Muslim state that has become a democracy. For a period, this became so. However, there are strong indications today that Islamism is increasingly popular, which bodes ill for democracy.

Over time, resentment and underground humor in Egypt began the next cycle of revolt. The quickly-called election put a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in power, and this long-time Islamist cult, which the people seemed to support, was shortly voted out because of incompetence and increasing anarchy, only to be replaced by an army general.

The trajectories that characterize all revolutions (except for that of the United States—Tunisia and initially Indonesia) should be no surprise to those who understand revolutions. There is initial euphoria and often promises of real change in the early stages of revolutions. In the French Revolution, for example, the young intellectuals who considered this a time to put in effect enlightenment values, enacted several progressive ideas: first, emancipating all slaves held in French Caribbean territories.

⁵ See Trager, Eric (2016). *Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days*. Georgetown University Press.

Then, granting benefits to women, such as serving in the parliament, rights to secure a divorce, rights to inheritance, and even new dress styles that freed them from the constriction of stays and exaggerated costumes and hair styles that required teams of servants to produce. But these rights were quickly reversed when dictatorship replaced the revolutionaries.

The Bastille prison had already been opened and destroyed, giving rise to the belief that justice would finally be reformed.⁶ A modern tool of execution, the Guillotine, replaced the traditional axe or sword, this considered more humane. Other revolutionary notions included changing street names; changing weeks to 10-days long and the days renamed numerically; a year of 12 months, each containing three weeks, and extra days added to make the math work.

This exaggerated reform came to a quick end with dictatorial ideologues seizing power and instituting a reign of terror in the country. Many of the freedoms promised by the revolutionaries were reversed when dictatorships took power. The earliest example of this occurred when a military general, Napoleon, seized power and crowned himself Emperor. Even the emancipation of the Black slaves in the French colonies was reversed when the planters protested. Money talks. In addition, the legal benefits originally granted to women were revoked (rights of divorce, inheritance, and individual autonomy).

In the case of France, it ultimately returned to its more democratic roots, largely because of its uniquely Western cultural-legal context. These western values have not yet thrived in other 20th century revolutions.

The 1918 Russian and 1949 Chinese Revolutions both followed the same trajectory as the French, although neither so far has morphed to the liberal democracy that the French have. The initial chaotic euphoria and hopes of participatory governance were overtaken by small radical cells that seized power. Both Russia and China underwent the horrors of dictators (Stalin and Mao) who stayed in power that grew ever more dangerous as their minds deteriorated. Revolutions are complex; but even more complex are the systems that sustain total dictatorial power. Such systems lack the divisions of power, the independent institutions of press and the judiciary, which protect liberal democracies. Dictatorships destroy these institutions upon taking control.

⁶ A disillusioned eyewitness to the betrayal of the French Revolution was Mary Wollstonecraft; see Gordon, Charlotte (2015). *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley*. Random House, pp. 201-2.

The Iranian Revolution followed suit. Most Iranians believed that they were getting a liberal democracy. They believed the Ayatollah's professions of belief in these values, but he was willing to use deceit and to move swiftly to reach his goals. The academic radicals never selected Khomeini to lead them. They actually believed (until it was too late) that he would merely be a symbol of virtue who had no intention to do anything other than return to his religious seminary to live out his days.

He quickly disabused them of this notion by seizing total power, and began the process of arresting, executing, and doing what revolutions do: "eating" their young. Very quickly, he organized a new "religious police" who would keep people in line, created a parallel army of religious ideologues to watch the regular army (Russia's Communists did the same with their military), and set about executions that by 1988 were estimated by Amnesty International, to reach 5,000 men, women and children.

Iran has today a limping, illiberal democracy, one based on a "constitution" hastily confirmed by the referendum. Elections are held, people (including women) vote, but they can only vote for a slate of candidates permitted by the clerics (council of experts). The judiciary are an arm of the clerics, and any attempt at producing a fair press is met with censorship or imprisonment of the journalists.

One attempt by the Iranian people to demonstrate their discontent with this system (Iran's so-called "Green Revolution" of 2009) ended in bloodshed and imprisonment of the opposition leaders. Today, the grumbling is underground: defiance of women to subvert the "modest" dress code, young college students defying the alcohol bans, and the flourishing of a vibrant culture of underground humor and mockery of the clerics.

Dictatorships that have the longevity of the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian Revolutions show the same signs of disillusionment over time. In Russia, the Stalin dictatorship ended with his death (perhaps poisoned by his inner circle) and Khrushchev, his successor's determination to reveal the secret horror of Stalin's concentration camps (gulags). Eventually, the Russian Revolution disintegrated, mostly by its own exhaustion and the good luck of having a modernizing leader (Gorbachev).

The Chinese Revolution changed with the death of Mao, and the decision of his successors to diverge from Communist economic doctrine, instituting many of the characteristics of Capitalism. The political orthodoxy, however, has remained intact. The question will be to see how long the political order can resist the desires of an increasingly educated, traveled, and prosperous Middle Class.

Those who want to end a regime, even a dictatorship, should take a leaf from Jacques Barzun's observation: widespread humor and mockery can bring down a state. (This is also a tactic many times noted in Gene Sharp's work on nonviolent action, ca. 1970s.) Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence* tracks the fall of the French monarchy during the French Revolution to the point where the French elites had no fear of making jokes about the monarchy. One characteristic of nasty governments—theocracies, dictatorships, and authoritarian monarchies, is that they have no sense of humor. The one thing that can put a frightening government on the defensive is to know that their subjects are laughing at them. This is a pattern that repeats.

Republics such as ours have little fear that making fun of the government or mocking our leaders will bring down the walls—but dictatorships do have such fears. When Romania's dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, made a speech to his abused population on December 21, 1989, he was startled to hear laughter and hoots—and the armed soldiers in the square, contrary to his expectations, did not shoot them; they arrested him instead, and he was dead by morning.⁷

Perhaps we miss the boat in dealing with the “hearts and minds” of the benighted populations of the world when we do not use comedy and soap operas to get our points across. Laughter, mockery, and serialized stories can be very destabilizing—and effective. Examples are plentiful.

A few years ago, a Persian comedy group in Beverly Hills put on their hilarious weekly TV program for their Persian-speaking audience. By a fluke, it was picked up by satellite and beamed to Iran. The Iranian public was much entertained and the government started to confiscate satellite dishes (a losing battle for them). In the broadcast was a segment called “Ask the Mullah,” in which a ridiculous little turbaned fellow gave answers to call-in questions that brought down the house — and were too realistic for comfort of the clerics. Our own *60 Minutes* picked this up and suggested that our government sponsor this regularly. We never followed up on it! The tradition of mocking clerics is old and honored in Iran—and we should build on it.

Nonviolent techniques have been successful in places where the authoritarian leaders are reluctant to shed blood because the world is watching.⁸ This was true for the nonviolent demonstrations at the end of the Soviet Union (the Velvet Revolutions of Eastern Europe), even in such a terror state as East Germany. Tunisia and Indonesia are examples of Muslim-majority countries in which dictatorships were brought down by nonviolent means.

⁷ Watch Ceausescu's final speech: <https://www.youtube.co/watch?v=t6pvMFfQF50>.

⁸ See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols (Boston: P. Sargent, 1973).

However, even when such revolutions succeed, their ability to survive as liberal democracies depends upon a history of exposure to the values of Western Civilization (legal-political values). We are already seeing liberal democracy in trouble in Poland and Romania, and the jury is out if nonviolent demonstrations will be able to turn these dictatorial movements around.

During the 1930s, almost every one of the new democratic republics created in the aftermath of World War I morphed into fascist dictatorships (Poland and Germany) or were quickly conquered by their Nazi neighbor (Czechoslovakia and Austria). We may be seeing the same phenomenon in Eastern Europe now.

Modernizing movements in Muslim-majority countries that appeared ready to sustain liberal democracies (Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia) are under attack from dictatorial leadership and resurgent militant Islamism. With no historic tradition embracing the important elements of Western liberal democracy, there is little hope that nonviolent demonstrations can save them.

The one country in this group that appears to be sustaining its democratic revolution is Tunisia, perhaps because it had not faced population explosion as have its neighbors, and because secular life and a burgeoning middle class supported its primary industry, European tourism.

We are living in revolutionary times, and the history of revolutions has much to offer. History has shown us that the more violent the revolution, the more difficult it is to transition to a Western style liberal democracy. With the exception of the violent French Revolution, which over time became a western style democracy, all of the other violent revolutions led to reigns of terror followed by ferocious dictatorships. These histories should provide us with some opportunities to understand how revolutions really work, how to avoid the siren call of violent political revolutions, and how to help bring down bad ones.

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