

Introduction

A COMMON EXPLANATION for the 1979 Iranian Revolution was that “modernization” had proceeded too rapidly, that people had reacted against the changes related to modernization. Of course many Iranians, including religious figures, the conservative *bazaris* (shopkeepers, owners and wholesalers in the bazar) and the lower classes, did not like aspects of modernization promoted by the central government, such as women’s European-style too-revealing clothing, lack of proper segregation between the sexes and the rule against girls and women wearing scarves or veils in schools and government workplaces. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi seemed more interested in appearances, in a modern-looking style of living, than in real modernization in terms of more egalitarian and collaborative relationships in political process and other areas of life.¹ Many of the Shia clergy did not like their loss of power and the land reform they considered to be against Islamic law and that also made them lose sources of wealth.

I came to a different judgment about the connections between modernization and the Revolution.² Modernization led to the Revolution in other, more substantial ways. In the process of fieldwork in a community, while working closely with individuals, it was easy to see how the dynamics of economic and political change were related to people’s decisions to join the revolutionary movement. I found that people were reacting not so much against modernization as against insufficient or uneven modernization. Why should other, richer Iranians have so much more of it than they did? Inequitable modernization kindled resentment.

Also, modernization in means of communication and transportation helped enable the Revolution. People could use literacy to write and read the ubiquitous graffiti and the revolutionary fliers. They could use loudspeakers to reach large audiences at shrines and mosques and demonstrations, cassette tapes and recorders to distribute revolutionary speeches, and radios and televisions to listen to foreign news broadcasts, especially the BBC. Roads and transportation could bring people from place to place, to talk and listen and demonstrate and march. Young people gathered with one another in schools and universities inside Iran and abroad and learned about other societies and political philosophies.

Modernization in the form of many new types of jobs, greatly improved transportation and communication, and expanding educational opportunities helped enable revolutionary action by freeing village people from the control of community representatives of the central government.³ Villagers were no longer dependent upon local politicians for their livelihoods—for access to agricultural land—and thus were largely out of reach of their political control as well.

Modernization in the form of more effective means of force and control over the population also prevented kinship-based groups from organizing effectively. The central government could keep its local representatives in office rather than allow local contenders to fight it out and ratify the winner in office. Before land reform and the strengthening of the central government, community residents were able to have some effect on political administration, but without such a possibility, people found themselves unable to choose new local representatives, and their resentment could only grow. In the end, modernization of the armed forces, using them to quell dissent, resulted in the stifling of political action at the local level and therefore the diverting of political dissatisfaction to higher levels, leading ultimately to the rage and action against the Pahlavi regime.

Ultimately, a main reason for the Iranian Revolution was the *lack* of political modernization.⁴ If political modernization had also taken place, if the central government had been more responsive to the population and allowed participation in government instead of using force to silence dissent, the Revolution might well have been avoided. Modernization, in the form of expanding and wielding against citizens the gendarmes (rural police), police, secret police (SAVAK) and armed forces, succeeded in damming up political action until resentment accumulated and gathered such force that

it could overturn a regime. Also, in Aliabad, because of lack of political modernization and therefore lack of knowledge about alternative ways of approaching political process, villagers returned to their local *taifeh-keshi* (political competition and conflict among kinship-based factions), applying this political paradigm to the 1978–1979 revolutionary process.

A Taifeh-Keshi Struggle from Aliabad History

Shortly after I arrived in Aliabad, during the 1978 fall term, many Iranian university students and professors went on strike in support of the revolutionary movement against the government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Because the University of Tehran was basically closed, Hushang, son of Haidar Amini, came back from Tehran to Aliabad. He described to me a power struggle from village political history in which his family had been involved that had resulted in a change of *kadkhoda* (village headman). It may well have been the last time kinship-based factional conflict brought in a new *kadkhoda* in Aliabad.

A long time ago, before land reform, we had a fight with the Saedis over a little piece of land. It was when Mulla⁵ Jamshid [Ajami] was *kadkhoda*. The Saedis were relatives of Mulla Jamshid because Mulla Jamshid's daughter was the wife of Haj Ali Panah Saedi, son of Haj Khodadad Saedi.⁶ The Saedis thought that because the *kadkhoda* was on their side, they could do whatever they wanted.

One of my cousins, Am Aziz,⁷ had placed stones around a piece of land that hadn't yet been planted to show that it was his. The Saedis wanted to take it. They claimed it was theirs.

One day Am Aziz was taking his cow out the village gate to give it water. Haj Khodadad Saedi's son hit Aziz and started a fight. Am Aziz left his cow there and went home to tell everyone. My father, Haidar—head of our *taifeh* [kinship-based political faction]—told everyone to get ready for a fight. Everyone went out. The fight was near Seyyid Rahim's shop.

We had a big *taifeh*. Mulla Jamshid had a large group too, and they helped the Saedis. A stone hit the back of Amu Ramazan's head. He fell down. My father—Haidar—shouted, "Bring him into the courtyard"—everyone was screaming that he'd been killed—"and then let's go and get revenge."

The fighting went on. My father gave Haj Khodadad a severe blow on the head with a cudgel, and he fell over.

The fight ended to our advantage. Our *taifeh* got the plot of land, for two reasons—one, because we were stronger, and two, because the right was on our side; we

had put in the earlier claim. The Saedis thought that since they had the kadhoda, and his taifeh was on their side, they'd be able to beat us.

The other side accepted Mulla Jamshid as kadhoda, and our side supported Haj Manuchehr Zamani. Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari and Seyyid Yaqub Askari supported my father in this matter. Our side—Seyyid Ibn Ali, Seyyid Yaqub, Haj Manuchehr and so on—supported Arab, who was the landlord after all. [In formal terms, Asadollah Khan Arab Shaibani was not actually landlord. He was the agent, serving as intermediary with the kadhodas, and husband of the absentee Qavam landlord, a female—Khanum Khorshid Kolah Qavam—who took over Aliabad from the previous Qavam family owner.]⁸

After this incident, Arab invited everyone to the city and scolded and threatened Mulla Jamshid. He told him, "If you do this sort of thing again, I'll take over your land and kick you out of the village."

So this shows that Seyyid Ibn Ali and Seyyid Yaqub were on Arab's side, that the right was on our side and that Amu Aziz could cultivate that piece of land.

A person from Darab was sitting there too. Ali Panah, Mulla Jamshid's son-in-law, said to this Darabi, "We have more power than anyone else in Aliabad. We have so much power that we could even refuse Arab access to the village and refuse access to Seyyid Ibn Ali and Seyyid Yaqub—who are nothing compared with Arab, the landlord after all."

The people from Darab said back to him, "Then why did you lose?"

The night of the fight, the other side went to Arab and complained, saying, "There was a big fight, and they really beat up eight or nine of our people."

They went to complain, but when Arab found out that everyone realized the right was on the side of my father, he took our side.

Later on, Arab said to my father, "Have you opened a butcher shop?" He meant, "You've bloodied up so many people."

Another incident took place about a year later. A lot of rain had fallen and a large pool of water had collected in the open area just inside the village gate. The water was about to run into our courtyard. My father, Haidar, and my uncles who lived in the same courtyard decided to make a ditch through the gate passageway to the outside of the village to let the water out. Mulla Jamshid said, "If you dig a ditch, the water will get into the storage rooms lining the passageway."

At the time, the storage rooms were filled with Arab's wheat. But the rooms were one meter above the level of the road. Since the rooms were at a higher level, the water wouldn't reach them.

My father went ahead and dug the ditch. Mulla Jamshid wrote a long letter to Arab telling him about the situation and saying that the water was ruining his wheat. Arab sent for my father, who went to the city and explained to him that this wasn't the case. They planned to come to the village and together look into the matter.