Iran's Revolutions: Crash Course World History 226

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Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course World History and today we're talking about Iran

Oh, Mr. Green? Mr. Green? I know that country. It's in the Middle East. It's with Egypt.

No, Me from the Past, we're going to talk about Iran. Now, I used to be you so I remember when you would look at this part of the world and you would be like, "oh yeah, that's a thing."

And in your case that "thing" extended more or less from I guess, like, western China to, like, uh, Poland.

Then you'd make a bunch of broad generalizations about that area and no doubt use the terms Arab and Muslim interchangeably.

But as usual Me From the Past the truth resists simplicity. So today we are going to talk about Iran and just Iran. Specifically, the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

So the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its aftermath are often seen by detractors as the first step in the creation of an isolated, fundamentalist state that supports terrorism, and, you might be surprised to hear me say, that there is some truth to that interpretation.

That said, the way you think about the Iranian Revolution depends a lot of which part of it you are looking at.

And regardless, it's very important because it represents a different kind of revolution from the ones that we usually talk about.

So the 1979 uprisings were aimed at getting rid of the Pahlavi Dynasty, which sounds, like, impressive, but this dynasty had only had two kings, Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah.

Before the Pahlavis, Iran was ruled by the Qajar dynasty, and before that the Safavids.

The Safavids and Qajars were responsible for two of the most important aspects of Iran: The Safavids made Shia Islam the official state religion in Iran, starting with Ismail I in 1501, and the Qajars gave the Muslim clergy – the ulema – political power.

So most of the world's Muslims are Sunnis but the Shia, or Shiites are an important sect that began very early on – around 680 CE and today form the majority of Muslims in Iran and Iraq.

Now within both Sunni and Shia there are further divisions and many sects, but we're just going to talk about, like, the historical difference between the two.

Shia Muslims believe that Ali should've been the first Caliph, Sunni Muslims think that Abu Bakr, who was the first Caliph, was rightly chosen.

Since that disagreement, there have been many others, many doctrinal differences but what's more important is that from the very beginning, Shia Muslims saw themselves as the party of the oppressed standing up against the wealthy and powerful and hearkening back to the social justice standard that was set by the prophet.

And this connection between religious faith and social justice was extremely important to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and also to previous revolutions in Iran.

This is really crucial to understand because many historians argue that the Iranian revolution represents what the journalist Christian Caryl called an "odd fusion of Islam and late-twentieth century revolutionary politics."

But actually, in the scheme of Iranian history, its not so odd.

Because 1979 was not Iran's first revolution. The first major one was in 1906. It forced the ruling Qajars to accept a constitution.

It created a parliament and supposedly some limits on the king, and made Shia Islam the official state religion, but it also protected the rights of minorities in Iran.

It ultimately failed partly because the clergy withdrew their support, partly because the shah worked very actively against it, and maybe most importantly, because the Russians and the British worked to keep Persia weak so they could continue to try to dominate the region.

Which reminds me that most people in Iran are not Arabs, they are Persian.

And most people in Iran don't speak Arabic, they speak Farsi, or as we often call it in English, Persian.

So after WWI European rivalries really heated up because of the discovery of oil in the Middle East. The British established the Anglo Iranian Oil Company – which would later come to be known as BP.

They also extracted a bunch of concessions from the Iranian government in addition to extracting lots of oil.

And they helped to engineer a change in dynasty by supporting military commander Reza Khan in his coup in February 1921.

Reza Khan became Reza Shah and then he attempted to turn Persia, which he re-named Iran in 1935, into a modern, secular, western-style state kind of like Turkey was under Ataturk.

But Reza Shah is perhaps best remembered for his over the top dictatorial repression, which turned the clergy against him.

Okay, so during World War II Reza Shah abdicated and his young son Mohammad Reza Shah became the leader of Iran. Which he remained, mostly, until 1979 when he definitely stopped being the leader of Iran.

So after World War II, the British allowed greater popular participation in Iran's government. The main party to benefit from this openness was Tudeh, the Iranian communist party.

Mohammad Mosaddegh was elected prime minister in 1951 and led the parliament to nationalize Iran's oil industry, and that was the end of the democratic experiment.

Now most history books say that in 1953 the British and the CIA engineered a coup to remove Mosaddegh from office.

And that is quite possibly true. It is definitely true that we tried to engineer a coup.

It's also true that Mosaddegh quit and fled Iran following demonstrations against him.

But we also know that the Shia clergy encouraged those demonstrations.

That's a bit of a weird decision for the Clergy, considering that Shia Islam traditionally takes a radical stance against oppression.

But it's important to remember that Mosaddegh was supported by the Tudeh party and they were communists.

Nationalization of the oil industry was one thing, but a further shift toward communism might mean appropriation of the land that supported the clergy, maybe even a rejection of religion altogether.

So now we've seen two occasions where the Shia clergy support helped facilitate change. Right, in 1906 and again in 1953.

So, let's flash ahead to 1979. The Shah was definitely an autocrat, and he employed a ruthless secret police called the SAVAK to stifle dissent.

In 1975, the Shah abolished Iran's two political parties and replaced them with one party the Resurgence party. You'll never guess who was resurging - the Shah.

There was a huge round of censorship and arrests and torture of political prisoners signaling that autocracy was in Iran to stay.

But before those events in 1975, say between 1962 and 1975, by most economic and social measures Iran saw huge improvements.

In 1963, the Shah had tried to institute what he called a White Revolution – top-down modernization led by the monarchy, and in many ways he was successful, especially in improving industry and education.

Oil revenues rose from $555 million in 1964 to $20 billion in 1976.

And the Shah's government invested a lot of that money in infrastructure and education. The population grew and infant mortality fell. A new professional middle class arose.

But the White Revolution wasn't universally popular. For instance, it was opposed by one particular Shia cleric - the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Khomeini spoke out against the White Revolution from the religious center of Iran, Qom.

One of his main complaints was that the reforms would grant more rights to women, including the right to vote, but he also attacked the government for, quote: "the rigging of elections and other constitutional abuses, neglect of the poor and the sale of oil to Israel."

And in general, Khomeini felt that a king's power was inherently un-Islamic and that Shia tradition was to fight that power.

That noted about Khomeini, the 1979 revolution didn't start out to create an Islamic state. At first it was a pretty typical uprising by dissatisfied Iranians to overthrow a government that they perceived as corrupt and unresponsive to their needs.

In spite of, or arguably because of, oil-fueled economic growth, many Iranians weren't enjoying economic success. The universities were turning out more graduates than there were jobs and the mechanization of agriculture had the predictable result of displacing farmers who moved to cities.

Especially the capital city of Tehran where there weren't nearly enough jobs for the number of people.

So, I think it's unfair to say that a majority of the demonstrators who took to the streets in late 1978 were motivated by a fundamentalist vision of Islam. They were dissatisfied with economic inequality and political repression and a corrupt regime.

So why do we generally remember the 1979 revolution as having been motivated by Shia Islam. Well, Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So the initial demonstrations did begin after an Iranian newspaper on January 7, 1978 published an article that was critical of Khomeini. By the way, at the time he was living in Paris. These initial demonstrations were pretty small, but when the government police and army forces starting firing on demonstrators, killing some of them, the protests grew. Each time marchers protested against the violent treatment of demonstrators, the government would crack down, and their violent reaction would spur more demonstrations. There was also a lot of criticism of the west tied up in the revolution. According to one woman who participated:

"American lifestyles had come to be imposed as an ideal, the ultimate goal. Americanism was the model. American popular culture – books, magazines, film – had swept over our country like a flood...We found ourselves wondering 'Is there any room for our own culture?'"

The Shah never understood why so many people were protesting against him; he thought that they were communists, or being supported by the British. He also thought that merely bringing prosperity would be enough to keep him in power.

It wasn't. On January 16, 1979 he left Iran. He eventually ended up in the U.S., which had unfortunate consequences for diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran.

But the point here is that the first part of the Iranian revolution was relatively peaceful protests followed by a government crackdown, more protests that eventually led to the collapse of the monarchy, and that looks kind of familiar, especially if you've studied, like, the French or Russian or even the American Revolutions.

And most historians argue these protests weren't about Islam, but rather, "The discontent over living conditions, pay cuts, and the threat of unemployment fused with the general disillusionment and anger with the regime."

The government that eventually replaced the monarchy was the second, and in many ways much more revolutionary revolution.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So the new Islamic Republic of Iran was based on Khomeini's idea about what an Islamic government should be, a principle he called velayat-e faqih.

Mainly it was that a sharia law scholar, would have ultimate authority, because he was more knowledgeable than anyone about law and justice.

There would be a legislature and a president and a prime minister, but any of their decisions could be overturned by the supreme ruler who from 1979 until his death was Khomeini.

Now, if democracy is only about holding elections, then the new Iran was a democracy. I mean, Iran has elections, both for president and for the parliament.

And for the record, despite what Khomeini might have thought in the '60s, women can vote in Iran and they do. They also serve in the parliament and the president's cabinet.

And in the referendum on whether to create an Islamic Republic of Iran, the vast majority of Iranians in a free and open vote, voted "yes."

Now governance in Iran is extremely complicated, too complicated

for one Crash Course video. But in once sense at least, Iran is definitely not a democracy.

The ultimate authority, written into the constitution, is not the will of the people but god, who is represented by the supreme religious leader. And the actions of the Islamic Republic, especially in the early chaotic days of 1979 but also many times since, don't conform to most ideas of effective democracy.

Like one of the first things that Khomeini did to shore up his support was to create the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah to defend the revolution against coup attempts.

Although initially there were opposition parties, their activities were curtailed by the new "revolutionary courts" that applied sharia law in a particularly harsh fashion.

Like it's estimated that by October 1979, several hundred people had been executed.

And under the new constitution, Khomeini was given extensive power. I mean, he could appoint the heads of the armed services, and the Revolutionary Guard and the national TV and radio stations.

He also approved the candidates for presidential elections and appointed six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council that approved legislation from the parliament before it became law.

So structurally Iran's government looked kind of like other governments, but as Michael Axworthy points out it was different because, quote, "above and beyond stood the faqih, with the power and the responsibility to intervene directly in the name of Islam; indeed with powers greater than those given to most monarchs in constitutional monarchies."

By 1979, Iran already had a long history of clerical involvement in protest and dynamic change, but it also had a long history of pushing for constitutions and liberty.

The current end result is the Islamic Republic of Iran, but it's worth remembering that both those threads of history are still part of Iranian life.

Like we saw that in 2009 and 2010 with the so-called Green Revolution where there were huge protests after an Iranian election. Those protests involved young people arguing for more rights and liberties.. But they were also led by, and encouraged by, reformist Shia clerics.

In the U.S. we mostly remember the 1979 Iranian Revolution for its burning of American flags and taking of hostages in the American Embassy.

That belonged more to the second phase of the revolution, the chaotic period when the Islamic republic was being born.

Life in the Islamic Republic of Iran remains highly repressive. I mean, for instance, Iran still executes a very high percentage of criminals.

But it's inaccurate to say that Iran is merely a dictatorship, or that it's merely repressive. And one of the challenges for people in the West trying to understand Iran is that we have to disentangle the various aspects of the revolution rather than simply relying on the images that have defined it for us.

I hope this episode can help a little. You can find more resources in the links below. Thanks for watching.

Crash Course is filmed here in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz studio in Indianapolis and it's made possible because of the hard worth of all of these people.

Thank you for watching and as we say in my hometown, "don't forget to be awesome."