Streets of Revolution

Asef Bayat

The Revolution On 11 February 1979, Tehran radio announced the victory of the Iranian revolution with feverish jubilation, thus heralding the end of a 2500-year-old monarchy.[1] A tremendous mood of ecstasy overtook the populace who poured into the streets *en mass*. Young people danced, and women milled through the crowd handing out candies and sweet drinks, *sharbat*. Vehicles sounded their horns in unison, beaming their lights as they drove up and down the main streets, which only days before had witnessed bloody battles between the revolutionaries and the imperial army.

It was in these same streets that Akbar Nazemi's perceptive lens captured some of the most arresting images of the revolution in Iran. In interesting ways, his keen camera helps us 'read' some aspects of this tremendous political turning point. Indeed the common thematic images of great political turning points are well represented in Nazemi's brilliant snap shots – the sea of people rallying in public squares, the burning streets, comrades carrying wounded revolutionaries, the sober yet nervous expression of soldiers, and of course falling statues and the breaking of prison gates. They all represent the 'street politics' of exceptional junctures, common features of many great revolutions. But what about the specifics? What distinguishes one revolution from another? In what way, then, was the Iranian revolution a distinct happening? And how can we decipher its particularities? We can do so only by reading it in its temporal or historical dimensions.

In Iran, the victory day was the culmination of over eighteen months of mass demonstrations, violent

Demonstration:
Two Million Participants
Winter, 1979

confrontations, massive industrial actions, a general strike, and many political maneuverings. Yet the genesis of the revolution went far back, indeed it was rooted in the structural changes that had been underway since the 1930s, when the country began undergoing a process of modernization. It was accelerated after the CIA-engineered coup in 1953 that had toppled nationalist prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and reinstated the Shah. These structural changes engendered many conflicts, the chief among them being the tension between socio-economic development and political autocracy.[2] In this midst, state inefficiency, corruption and a sense of injustice among many sectors of the Iranian society accelerated political conflict in the country.

The modernization policy and economic change, initiated by the state under both Reza Shah (1925-1946) and his son, the late Shah Muhamad Reza Pahlavi, gave rise to the growth of new social forces, to the dismay of the traditional social groups. By the late 1970s, a large and well-to-do modern middle class, a modern youth, public women, an industrial working class, in addition to a new poor consisting of slum and squat dwellers, dominated the social scene. With the exception of the latter, these represented the beneficiaries of the economic development, enjoying relatively high status and comparable economic rewards. However, the persistence of the Shah's old-age autocracy prevented these thriving social layers from participating in the political process. This angered them. At the very same time, the old social groups – a segment of the traditional bazaaries, the old urban middle strata, the clergy and other adherents to Islamic institutions – were also frustrated by the modernization strategy as it undermined their economic interests and social status.

With all the conventional institutional channels closed to the expression of discontent as a result of repression, the populace was increasingly alienated from the state. In the meantime, corruption, inefficiency, a sense of injustice, and a feeling of moral outrage characterized the social psychology of many Iranians. So, during the tense years of the 1970s, at the height of the Shah's authoritarian rule and remarkable economic development, many people (except perhaps the upper class and landed peasantry) seemed dissatisfied, albeit for different reasons. But all were united in blaming the Shah and his western allies for that state of affairs. It is not surprising, then, that the language of dissent and protests was largely anti-monarchy, anti-imperialist, Third Worldist, and even nationalist, turning in the end to religious discourse.

The opportunity for popular mobilization arrived with what we used to call the "Carterite breeze" (*Nasseem-e Carteri*). President Carter's human rights policy in the late 1970s forced the Shah to offer a political space for a limited degree of expression. This expression, in the process, was cumulatively built up and, in the course of less than two years, swept aside the monarchy. It all

began with a limited relaxation on censorship, allowing some literary/intellectual activities (in the Goethe Institute and in Universities in Tehran) and public gatherings by political Islamists (in Oquba Mosque). It continued with the distribution by the intellectuals and liberal politicians of critical open letters to high-level officials. In this midst, an insulting article in a daily paper, *Ettilaat*, against Ayatollah Khomeini triggered a demonstration in the shrine city of Qum, in which some demonstrators were killed. To commemorate these deaths, a large-scale demonstration took place in the Azeri city of Tabriz in the north. This marked the beginning of a chain of events which formed a nationwide, revolutionary, protest movement in which diverse segments of the population, modern and traditional, religious and secular, men and women, massively participated, and in which the ulama came to exert its leadership. But why did the clergy in particular lead the revolution?

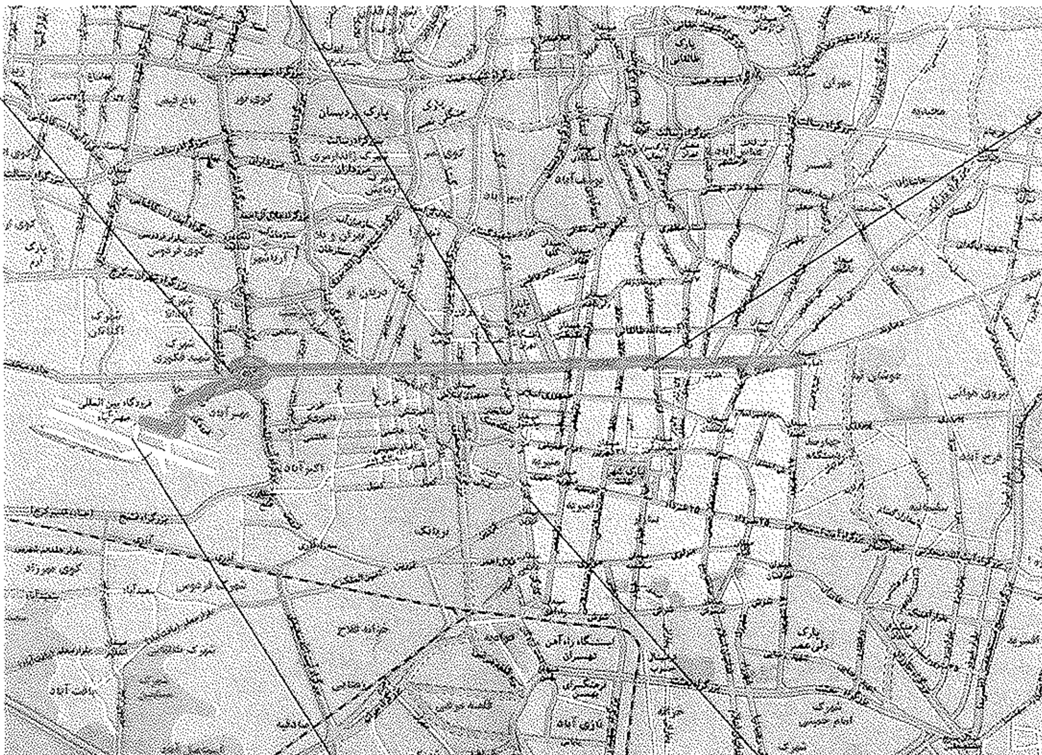
For over twenty-five years of autocratic rule, since the 1953 coup, all the effective secular political parties and non-governmental organizations had been removed or destroyed. The US-led coup crushed both the nationalist and communist movements; trade unions were infiltrated by the secret police, SAVAK; publications went through strict censorship and there remained hardly any effective NGOs.[3] The main organized political dissent came from the underground guerrilla organizations, Marxist Fedaian and radical Islamic Mujahedin, whose activities were limited to isolated armed operations.[4] Student activism also remained restricted either to campus politics inside the country or to those carried out by Iranian students abroad. In short, the secular groupings, while extremely dissatisfied, were organizationally decapitated.

Unlike the secular forces, however, the clergy had the comparative advantage of possessing invaluable institutional capacity, including its own hierarchical order, with over 10,000 mosques, Husseiniehs, Huwzehs (informal and ad hoc religious gatherings), and associations which acted as vital means of communication among the revolutionary contenders. Young Islamists, both girls and boys, along with young clerics, linked the institution of the ulama to the people. A hierarchical order facilitated unified decision-making, and a systematic flow of both order and information ensured discipline; higher-level decisions in the mosques were disseminated to both the activists and the general public. In short, beyond the lack of a credible alternative, this *institutional capacity* and a remarkable generality and thus *ambiguity* in the message of the clergy guaranteed the ulama's leadership. What maintained that leadership was the relatively rapid conclusion of revolutionary events – there was little time for debate and dissent, for a social movement to emerge, or for a possible alternative leadership to develop. Thus, the nascent Islamic movement of the 1970s rapidly transformed into a parallel state. 'Islamization', then, unfolded largely *after* the victory of the revolution, and was enforced primarily from above by the new Islamic

state. It was manifested in the establishment of clerical rule, the Islamic legal system, new cultural practices and institutions, and in the moral surveillance of the public space.

A Street Named "Revolution" Clearly revolutions are not merely the exceptional junctures of insurrections and regime change, of "moments of madness", as they have been termed. Nor are revolutionaries just the visible street actors. Millions work on the backstage of these highly complex dramas: workers in factories, landless peasants in farms, students in schools, employees in offices and leaders often behind the doors. Yet it is ultimately in the 'streets', public spaces par excellence, that collective challenge against invincible power-holders is galvanized, where the destiny of political movements is often decided. In other words, beyond the temporal component, revolutions also possess an inescapable spatial dimension. Thus, in addition to thinking about why revolutions take place, who participates in them, or how the events unfold, we should also be thinking of *where* they actually take place. More specifically, why do certain spaces/places, more than others, become the sites of acts and expressions of public discontent?

The Iranian revolution was primarily an urban movement. Massive demonstrations, protests and clashes took place overwhelmingly in the large cities, particularly in Tehran.[5] It is true that many rural inhabitants, farmers and landless peasants were also mobilized, yet they would go to the *cities* to communicate their collective discontent. The idea of cities as centers of discontent is perhaps as old as the cities themselves. As the seat of concentrated wealth, power, people and needs, cities are also sites of amassed contradictions and social conflicts.[6] Thus, by the eve of the 1979 revolution, the Iranian capital, Tehran, featured just such a contradictory site. With a population of some five million, Tehran exhibited a remarkable and perhaps unique class (economic, social and cultural) hierarchy. Located on a north-to-south sloping landscape, the geographical pyramid of the city reflected its social and economic hierarchy. To the far north, the highest district was the site of the most affluent part of the population and the most opulent neighborhoods, crowned by the royal palace standing at the very summit of the city. The middle areas, from east to west, housed the relatively large middle classes, the state employees, professionals and small business families. And the poor (new rural migrants and other strata of working people) were pushed away to seek shelters in lowest lands of the city, in slums and squatter settlements with few urban amenities and services[7] *(see Map, opposite)*. Indeed, the inequality of the capital embodied the prevailing social, economic and political order of the nation as a whole. Yet, beyond its profound socio-economic disparity, the spatial dimension of Tehran, its strategic streets, squares and institutions, offered an additional element for the expression of contentious politics.



Map of Greater Tehran

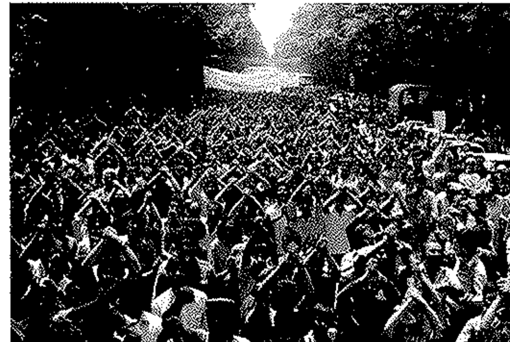
Among the 'revolutionary thoroughfares' such as Takht-e Jamshid Avenue, Khiaban Kargar, Maidan Zhaleh, a long east-west street which, appropriately, was renamed 'revolution street' (Khiaban-e Enghelab), stood as the most contentious space in the nation. It was largely here that Nazemi's camera recorded some of the most remarkable images of the revolutionary struggles. I can recall how as young radicals, my friends and I would rush to that particular street to collect news, demonstrate, attend rallies, obtain literature, participate in discussions, or meet with comrades. It was there that most clashes also occurred both during and after the revolution, so much so that it was virtually imagined as the spatial core of the revolution. Why did this particular street attract so many contenders? What made it a distinct space of contention? Again, by their very nature, streets in general represent the modern urban theater of contention *par excellence*. We need only to remember the role the "street" has played in such monumental political turning points as the French Revolution, nineteenth-century labor movements, anti-colonial struggles, the anti-Vietnam war movement in the US, the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe, and perhaps, the current global anti-war movement. The street is the chief locus of politics for ordinary people, those who are structurally absent from the centers of institutional power. Simultaneously social and spatial, constant and current, streets are a place of both the familiar and the strange, the visible and the vocal, representing a complex entity wherein sentiments and outlooks are formed, spread and expressed in a remarkably unique fashion. The street is the physical place where collective dissent may be both expressed and produced. The spatial element in street politics distinguishes it from strikes or sit-ins, because streets are not only where people protest, but also where they *extend* their protest beyond their immediate circle. For this reason, in the street, one finds not only marginalised elements – the poor and unemployed – but also actors with some institutional power, such as students, workers, women, state employees and shopkeepers whose march in streets is intended to extend their contention. For a street march not only brings together the 'invitees', but also involves the 'strangers' who might espouse similar, real or imagined, grievances. It is this epidemic potential, and not simply the disruption or uncertainty caused by riots, that threatens the authorities, who exert a pervasive power over public spaces – with police patrols, traffic regulation, spatial division – as a result. The police tactic of encircling demonstrators in a corner is devised to subvert the potential of *extension* of sentiments to the passers-by.

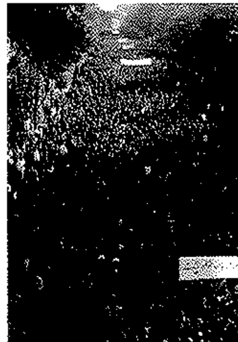
Beyond these general features, 'Revolution Street' in Tehran in particular possessed its own unique sociology. The magnificent presence of the Tehran University campus (established in 1934) on the stretch of several blocks housing over 20,000 students surely contributed to the militancy of the area. Across the university compound on the opposite side of the street there

were hundreds of bookshops and publishing houses which had uniquely turned these few blocks into the intellectual epicenter of the nation. This exclusive book-bazaar, the hang-out place of Iran's intellectual window shoppers, offered not only academic materials, but also underground revolutionary literature. Like the densely packed old bazaars, this book market assumed its own distinct identity and had a solid internal network – a place where news was spread and rumors were verified. During the revolution, many of these bookshops in Revolution Street sheltered the fugitive street protestors running away from the police. The secular, leftist, aura of the place and its goods stood in stark contrast to the more religious but far less spectacular districts around southern Tehran's traditional grand Bazaar, which served as the political hub of earlier, 1950s and 1960s, political activity. Surely Tehran University did contribute to the politicization of the area. But perhaps more important factors were involved.

In the earlier periods, e.g., the early 1950s, political crowds would congregate not around Tehran University, but primarily in the grand Baharestan Plaza which embraced the Parliament located in south Tehran. By the late 1970s, the social and spatial transformation of Tehran had pushed the physical and 'political center' of the city further north, to 'Revolution Street'. Thus, located half way between the north and south, this street carved the city into two distinct geographical and social universes. In a sense, it signified a virtual 'green line' demarcating the 'affluent north' ('bala-ye shahr') and 'poor south' ('pain-e shahr') – a distinction that was unequivocally registered in the popular imaginary and language. Not only the intersection of the rich and poor zones, the street was also the meeting point of the urban-rural. In the far-eastern end of the street, roughly the edge of the city, stood the massive Shahyad Square (Liberation Square, after the revolution) which together with its neighboring Reza Shah Square (later, Revolution Square) gathered the largest revolutionary crowds in pre-(and post) revolution Iran. As a hub of inter-city bus and taxi terminals, these two squares contained the crucial transportation networks linking the capital city to the nearby villages and provincial towns. A traveler to Tehran would disembark, first, in these very grand roundabouts. Here, the plebian visitors would rest on the pavement, eat in the cheap street food stands or tea houses, stroll around, buy gifts from street vendors, get the news of the town, and perhaps see demonstrations before exiting the city. In the absence of a free press and media, it was from places like this that the travelers would spread the news of the revolution. In totality then, Revolution Street represented a unique juncture of the rich and the poor, the elite and the ordinary, the intellectual and layman, the urban and the rural. It was a remarkable political grid, intersecting the social, the spatial, and the intellectual, bringing together not only diverse social groups, but also institutions of mobilization (the University) and the dissemination of knowledge and news (the rows of bookstores).

Thus the first incidents of collective protest during 1977 emerged from 'Revolution Street'. Students' demonstrations for free speech following ten evenings of literary-political rallies at the Goethe Institute in the autumn catalyzed a chain of street mass protests, riots and military confrontations which eventually toppled the Monarchy. The monumental victory day did not mark the end of street action. For after the revolution, new episodes of street politics with more complex configurations unfolded. Yet Revolution Street, which figures so prominently in Akbar Nazemi's photographs, continues to maintain its centrality in Iran's geography of contention even to this day ■





Previous Spread
Demonstrators Displaying Images of Revolutionary Heroes
Winter, 1979

Construction Site Flooded with Protestors
Autumn, 1978

Flower Bearers Greeting Ayatollah Talegani
March, 1978

Demonstration by Communist Party Members
Autumn, 1978

1. These sections draw heavily on my "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamic Activism in Iran and Egypt", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 42, no. 1, January 1998.

2. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, 1983; N. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 1981, Yale University Press; Mohsen Milani, *The Making of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, Boulder, Westvew Press, 1986; Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, London, Penguin Books, 1979.

3. On the anti-democratic nature of the Shah's regime and its political implications see Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, London: Penguin, 1977 (on SAVAK activities); Habib Lajevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, Syracuse University Press, 1985; Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, London, Macmillan, 1982.

4. On guerrilla activities in Iran see Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, London: Penguin Books, 1979; Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Tow Revolutions*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982.

5. See Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.

6. For an excellent discussion see Manuel Castells, *Cities and Grassroots*, University of California Press, 1983.

7. See Asef Bayat, *Street Politics*, pp. 25-26