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Gifts Presented to the Shah: From the Pahlavi Dynasty to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist

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Abstract: The Pahlavi dynasty represented a centralized monarchical system during Iran's modernization. Its political model, characterized by centralized administration, close relations with the United States, and extensive economic and social modernization programs, contributed to rapid economic growth while generating significant social and political frictions. Using "a gift presented to the Shah" as a metaphor, this paper examines the historical trajectory of the Pahlavi dynasty from its establishment and the consolidation of centralized authority to its eventual decline. It analyzes the relationship between modernization and political change from a Huntington-style perspective, exploring the origins of the 1978–1979 upheavals. Furthermore, it discusses the subsequent political transition, interactions among various groups, shifting positions of moderate and left-oriented forces, legal debates, and the development of a new political-legal framework. The study outlines Iran's institutional transformation from a monarchy, through brief republican experimentation, to a new legal framework following the 1978–1979 upheavals. The findings suggest that the dynasty's decline resulted from multiple interacting factors, including political frictions, social disparities, intergroup differences, and international influences, rather than solely religious-secular divides. The subsequent political reorganization involved substantial shifts in the relative influence of different social groups. Organizational capacity, institutional arrangements, security structures, and patterns of public participation contributed to changing the positions of secular, moderate, left-oriented, and regional forces, ultimately shaping the new political and institutional order.

Keywords: pahlavi dynasty; political transformation; institutional change; modernization; iranian society; transitional government

1. The Establishment of the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Consolidation of Centralized Political Authority

In the 20th century, Iran underwent a major political transformation, transitioning from a centralized monarchy to a new political and institutional configuration. This process included the conclusion of the Pahlavi era, evolving dynamics among societal groups, and comprehensive reorganization of governance structures. Under the leadership of two successive monarchs, Reza Khan and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, efforts were directed toward national development and enhanced regional engagement through highly centralized administrative systems. In later decades, accelerated economic development coincided with growing complexities in social and political adaptation [1]. A pivotal moment occurred in 1979, marking the end of monarchical rule and initiating an extended phase of institutional evolution. This phase did not yield immediate institutional stability; rather, it encompassed successive phases of administrative adjustment, foundational legal deliberations, shifting influence among key societal actors, and substantial reconfiguration of state institutions. Over time, the distribution of influence among principal participants in this transition evolved, culminating in the formation of a revised institutional architecture.

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"A gift presented to the Shah" is not a tangible object but a metaphorical expression reflecting the long-term outcomes of modernization initiatives undertaken during the Pahlavi era. These initiatives—including centralized governance models and international cooperative arrangements—interacted with broader societal developments, shaping the trajectory of subsequent political change. Concurrently, transformations in the composition, coordination, and public role of secular and other civic groups influenced the realignment of political influence during the transition period [1]. Drawing on documented developments in modern Iranian history and using the governance characteristics of the Pahlavi period as an analytical entry point, this study examines the features of centralized administration, the emergence of adaptive challenges across society, responses from diverse social constituencies, and the principal phases of political evolution. It further traces the sequence of interim administrative arrangements and institutional refinements that followed, outlining the historical progression from monarchical governance through transitional arrangements to the consolidation of a new political and institutional order.

1.1. Reza Khan's State-Building: The Development of a Centralized Monarchical Administration

The establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty followed a major political and institutional transition. In 1921, Reza Khan, an officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade, rose to prominence in the country's political developments, and in 1925 the dynasty was formally inaugurated, with Tehran as its administrative center. As its founder, Reza Khan advanced a strategy focused on strengthening administrative coherence, reorganizing state institutions, promoting secular-oriented initiatives, and pursuing modernization, all contributing to a more centralized governance framework.

Following assumption of leadership, Reza Khan implemented a broad set of administrative and societal measures, including revisions to legal frameworks and public administration, modifications to official attire norms, advancement of formal education systems, development of railway infrastructure, and consolidation of administrative authority under central oversight. These initiatives aimed to support institutional development, enhance governmental capacity, and foster socioeconomic progress within a highly centralized governance structure. During this phase, interactions among the monarchy, religious bodies, and representative assemblies evolved significantly, while decision-making authority became increasingly concentrated at the national level. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, later observed that the implementation of these modernization initiatives influenced evolving public understandings of his father's leadership role. Such centralized governance patterns shaped the institutional architecture of the dynasty and informed subsequent administrative and societal trajectories [2].

During the early 1940s, Iran's domestic circumstances were substantially shaped by global geopolitical dynamics and the strategic priorities of external actors. Reza Khan subsequently stepped down from office and departed the country, and developments during this period led to notable shifts in Iran's political landscape and institutional arrangements [1]. Subsequent diplomatic processes preserved the continuity of the monarchical system, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi succeeded to the throne. In the initial years of his reign, the balance of influence among political institutions shifted markedly, with the parliament assuming greater functional significance and formal procedural norms receiving renewed emphasis, notably through the work of Mohammad Mosaddegh. Over time, the institutional role of the monarchy adapted, accompanied by adjustments in the interplay among the monarchy, elected bodies, and state security apparatus. These transitions supported a progressive realignment of political institutions and the distribution of administrative responsibilities.

1.2. Pahlavi Centralization: The Development of a Centralized Political System

In 1953, Iran experienced a significant political transition involving domestic political forces and external actors, contributing to shifts in national leadership and the evolving role of the monarchy. During the subsequent period, governance structures became increasingly centralized, with the monarchy assuming a more prominent role in

administrative coordination, legislative processes, and public service delivery. As a result, the functional relationships among governing institutions, representative bodies, and formal procedural frameworks underwent notable transformation [3].

The institutional framework during this period comprised three principal components: an expanding administrative system, a modernized defense establishment, and the security organization SAVAK [4]. These entities contributed to public administration, societal stability, and policy implementation:

Administrative system: The civil service became increasingly coordinated, with officials at all levels operating under enhanced central guidance and standardized oversight mechanisms [5].

Defense establishment: The monarchy maintained close coordination with defense institutions, while substantial investment supported infrastructure development, technical training, and equipment acquisition. Specialized units were developed to support institutional capacity across key functional domains [1].

SAVAK: Established in the 1950s, SAVAK functioned as a domestic security and information agency during the Pahlavi period [6]. Its responsibilities included monitoring social developments, supporting internal stability initiatives, and facilitating inter-agency coordination. Its institutional growth paralleled broader efforts to strengthen administrative coherence and operational integration.

On the political level, party structures evolved toward greater institutional integration, and civic engagement was increasingly channeled through formal administrative pathways. In the late 1950s, the National Party and the People's Party emerged within the prevailing institutional environment [7]. Their membership and operations were closely aligned with established administrative and professional networks, reflecting the integrated nature of political participation. In 1964, both parties underwent structural adjustments in response to evolving governance priorities. In 1975, the Rastakhiz Party was formed as the primary national-level political organization, signifying further consolidation of institutional coordination. Participation in this organization was linked to roles in public service and civic institutions, and its outreach extended into economic and community sectors. Alignment with national development objectives and institutional continuity formed core elements of its stated orientation. Engagement with public institutions became increasingly associated with adherence to shared administrative goals, while alternative perspectives were accommodated within evolving institutional parameters.

On the ideological and cultural level, media, publishing, and educational activities operated within a coordinated policy environment. News reporting emphasized official communications, developmental progress, and institutional activities. In 1975, administrative procedures for printed materials were refined to enhance consistency in publication practices [7]. These adjustments influenced publishing workflows and shaped the operational context for scholarly and intellectual work. School curricula were implemented through unified policy frameworks, with instructional materials highlighting developmental achievements and institutional contributions. Educational institutions functioned within integrated administrative systems, shaping the conditions under which teaching and learning occurred.

On the social level, SAVAK's functions formed part of the country's broader institutional architecture for maintaining societal stability. Its operational methods have been examined in historical scholarship, reflecting wider considerations regarding governance approaches during the period. During the 1970s, aspects of the country's institutional arrangements drew attention from international observers [2]. SAVAK also engaged in cooperative activities with counterparts abroad, consistent with standard practices for institutional exchange. Together with other administrative entities, these organizations supported coordinated information management, operational coordination, and administrative integration across multiple domains.

By the 1970s, governance during the Pahlavi period had become highly integrated. Decision-making authority was concentrated within the highest levels of the institutional

hierarchy, with strong emphasis on coherence and continuity. Major policy directions were formulated through centralized deliberative processes, while executive, administrative, and organizational bodies operated within a unified framework. Senior officials were appointed and guided through structured administrative protocols, and interdepartmental collaboration was reinforced through formal coordination mechanisms [8]. This configuration strengthened the institutional centrality of the highest decision-making authority.

2. The Legitimacy Challenges of the Pahlavi Dynasty: The Process of Modernization

2.1. Huntington's Modernization Dilemma: The Structural Challenges of Monarchical Rule

A widely observed phenomenon in political development indicates that a traditional monarchy pursuing comprehensive societal transformation may encounter a fundamental challenge:

To sustain political legitimacy, the ruling authority may advance initiatives aimed at societal transformation, while such initiatives often necessitate reinforcing centralized administrative capacity and adapting long-standing institutional arrangements and established patterns of civic engagement [9]. This process may introduce friction with historically rooted foundations of monarchical governance.

Successful societal transformation may concurrently diminish certain traditional bases of political legitimacy and heighten expectations among diverse population segments for broader civic involvement [10]. When institutional frameworks possess limited adaptive capacity to integrate these evolving expectations, the political system may face mounting pressures on its legitimacy and encounter challenges in preserving structural continuity.

The Pahlavi dynasty serves as a significant historical instance for analyzing this dynamic. In 1963, a broad-based national development program was introduced, encompassing land reallocation, infrastructure investment, expanded educational access, industrial advancement, and growth in the energy sector—contributing to rapid economic and social evolution in Iran. Following the rise in energy export revenues after 1973, national development priorities emphasized strengthening Iran's standing within the global community and advancing long-term civilizational objectives [11]. These developments reflected substantial economic transformation during the period.

Economic advancement generated notable shifts in social composition, including urban growth, the development of professional and managerial groups, increased employment in manufacturing sectors, wider access to formal education, and evolving roles for traditional commercial and scholarly communities. Concurrently, mechanisms for civic engagement remained largely centralized, resulting in a marked disparity between socioeconomic progress and the evolution of participatory institutions. As a result, differing perspectives emerged across demographic segments, while certain rural and urban labor populations encountered transitional difficulties associated with economic restructuring [3]. Some communities increasingly turned to locally embedded and faith-based networks for mutual support, reinforcing the public presence of organizations grounded in shared cultural and ethical frameworks.

Economic progress coincided with heightened public attention to administrative transparency, equitable access to development opportunities, and fairness in resource allocation [12]. Senior members of prominent families and other influential circles participated extensively in commercial and industrial ventures, prompting discussions regarding fairness in market access and alignment of private interests with public responsibilities. Certain administrative and uniformed personnel also faced scrutiny concerning standards of conduct and appropriate application of official authority. Meanwhile, transformations in urban consumption habits, cultural production, and daily life became more pronounced. Increased international collaboration in science, technology, and industry brought growing numbers of foreign specialists to Iran, influencing urban

environments and facilitating broader exposure to global knowledge systems and social practices.

2.2. Multiple Dimensions of Legitimacy Challenges

2.2.1. Loss of Legitimacy

King Pahlavi exercised broad executive authority, with institutional frameworks operating primarily in formal capacity. Legislative institutions functioned within constrained parameters, and legal instruments exerted limited influence on actual governance practices. His administration depended heavily on a large-scale administrative apparatus, a professional military force, and a specialized security organization to sustain centralized governance.

Political pluralism was significantly curtailed through regulatory measures that limited the scope and operation of organized political groups. Several prominent associations experienced operational limitations or suspension of activities. Certain organized groups were subject to lawful security measures under prevailing legal provisions. Structural adjustments—including legislative dissolution, statutory revisions, and appointments to advisory bodies—contributed to the consolidation of decision-making authority. Over time, segments of the educated public, professional classes, and formerly supportive civic organizations expressed growing concerns regarding institutional arrangements, prompting reassessments of their engagement with the prevailing governance model. These developments affected perceptions of institutional continuity and procedural coherence. [13].

2.2.2. Loss of National Legitimacy

In 1953, a covert operation led to the removal of Prime Minister Mossadegh, resulting in significant political realignment in Iran. Subsequently, the Pahlavi administration pursued modernization initiatives while deepening institutional and economic ties with an external partner. This alignment included substantial bilateral cooperation in infrastructure development, technical training, and defense-related capacity building. Between 1970 and 1977, large-scale equipment transfers were conducted under intergovernmental agreements, with total transaction value amounting to 16.313 billion dollars. The Iranian government also participated in regional security frameworks, hosted technical personnel for collaborative projects, and extended standard diplomatic privileges to foreign nationals engaged in official assignments [14]. Over time, certain domestic constituencies expressed reservations regarding the scope and direction of these international engagements, interpreting them as affecting the perceived coherence between state institutions and broader societal expectations.

2.2.3. Loss of Religious Legitimacy

In 1971, the younger Pahlavi hosted a grand celebration at Persepolis to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire, inviting royalty and distinguished international guests. In 1976, adjustments were made to the official calendar system, reinforcing use of the Persian calendar. These initiatives highlighted Iran's ancient Persian heritage and historical continuity. Concurrently, structural changes affected longstanding social frameworks: land reallocation modified the economic base of religious endowments; revisions to women's legal status and social roles shifted traditional norms; secular education expanded in scope and reach relative to religious instruction; and the economic position of bazaar merchants underwent gradual transformation. As a result, the religious scholarly class—represented by the ulama—became more actively engaged in public discourse, articulating concerns regarding certain dimensions of state-led modernization and cultural policy.

2.2.4. Loss of Social Legitimacy

Modernization led to significant shifts in wealth distribution, administrative structures, and inflationary pressures. Oil revenues were concentrated among elite segments, including senior officials and business elites, while living expenses for the general population rose sharply—annual rent increases exceeded 100 percent in some

urban areas. Reports indicated substantial capital outflows, with approximately one billion dollars leaving the country monthly during 1976. These developments contributed to widening socioeconomic disparities and affected broad-based public confidence in state institutions [10].

2.3. The Changing Relations Among All Social Strata

Pahlavi's centralized governance contributed to a growing disengagement of various social groups from formal political institutions, reflecting broad-based shifts in societal attitudes [12].

The new middle class supported modernization initiatives but sought broader avenues for civic engagement and institutional participation; however, its involvement in core policy formulation remained limited, leading to diminished alignment with the prevailing administrative framework [13].

The working class experienced modest gains from economic growth but faced challenges related to price fluctuations and disparities in socioeconomic outcomes [5].

Peasants welcomed adjustments to land-related policies but expressed concerns regarding administrative centralization and uneven development across regions.

Bazaar merchants and artisans observed changes in their traditional economic roles amid modernization efforts and strengthened ties with religiously affiliated community networks [4].

The ulama experienced evolving roles within shifting sociopolitical conditions; some members assumed prominent positions in local civic life and facilitated community-oriented initiatives [10].

Bureaucrats and capitalists exhibited varied levels of institutional confidence, with increasing attention to asset preservation during periods of economic volatility. Within the highly centralized structure, opportunities for meaningful participation in governance were constrained for both newly emerging and historically established groups [8, 10]. Attitudinal divergence became more pronounced across diverse sectors, public discourse expanded in scope and reach, and the monarchy's capacity to sustain broad-based institutional legitimacy weakened over time.

In December 1978, Pahlavi proposed a transitional arrangement involving representatives of the new middle class; however, key figures from the National Front and the Freedom Movement aligned with Khomeini instead. Bakhtiar, the sole individual who accepted the appointment, subsequently withdrew from his prior affiliation. The new middle class declined the proposed framework and pursued collaborative arrangements with religious and other civic actors, indicating a notable reduction in institutional support for the ruling structure [6].

3. American Involvement and the Catalysis of Political Change

3.1. The U.S.-Iran Alliance: The King's Backing and Burden

The Pahlavi dynasty maintained close ties with the United States [4]. Within the broader international context of the mid-twentieth century, Iran was viewed as a strategic partner for cooperation in energy supply and regional stability, while the Pahlavi government utilized external technical assistance, economic collaboration, and diplomatic engagement to reinforce institutional frameworks.

During the early 1970s, bilateral relations between the two countries deepened significantly. High-level exchanges reflected mutual recognition of shared interests, and substantial transfers of equipment and expertise occurred across multiple sectors. A notable presence of foreign specialists in Iran facilitated knowledge exchange but also contributed to evolving domestic perspectives on cultural identity and policy priorities. As a result, segments of the Iranian population began to question the degree of external influence on national decision-making, and the country's alignment with external partners became a subject of public discourse regarding governance legitimacy [3].

3.2. Carter's Diplomatic Policy Diplomacy: A Catalyst for Political Change

In early 1977, a new U.S. administration assumed office. A group of officials with a particular policy orientation gained influence within key governmental departments, including the Department of State and the Executive Office. An office focused on international standards and civic well-being was established within the Department of State. With formal endorsement, initiatives were launched to highlight conditions in selected countries, and Iran became a focal point of these efforts [11, 12]. According to recollections from senior diplomatic personnel, certain mid-level officials—particularly those assigned to Iranian affairs—expressed reservations regarding the existing governance structure and advocated for institutional adaptation. Between 1977 and 1979, as domestic political dynamics in Iran evolved and institutional stability diminished, the U.S. government—having maintained longstanding cooperative relations with the Iranian authorities—adjusted its approach in alignment with previously articulated policy priorities. The U.S. envoy to Iran initially assessed that the situation remained manageable, and intelligence assessments projected no significant governance challenges for the Iranian authorities over the following decade, thereby underestimating the trajectory of subsequent developments.

This shift in external engagement created a complex environment for decision-making: measures aimed at reinforcing institutional continuity risked misalignment with expressed policy expectations, while adjustments intended to accommodate evolving circumstances introduced additional uncertainty [2]. Such external considerations influenced strategic choices and formed part of the broader contextual landscape preceding major institutional transitions.

3.3. The Trigger: The Ettela'at Article on Khomeini

On January 7, 1978, the Tehran newspaper Ettela'at published an article criticizing Khomeini, characterizing him in strongly negative terms and linking him to external geopolitical interests. The publication, situated within the broader political context of the time, contributed to heightened public attention and subsequent societal responses [14].

Khomeini was an Iranian Shia religious leader whose perspectives on governance diverged from the prevailing administrative framework [14]. Though residing abroad, he maintained broad recognition and resonance across segments of Iranian society. Following the article's appearance, religious institutions saw increased engagement in civic discourse and community coordination, with mosques serving as focal points for dialogue, organization, and shared activities.

3.4. Escalation of the Situation: From Qom to Tabriz-The Forty-Day Cycle

On January 9, 1978, a meeting of students and religious scholars occurred in Qom to express concerns regarding political conditions under the Pahlavi administration. The event was met by security personnel, leading to casualties; reports indicate at least twelve fatalities. In response, bazaar merchants suspended operations in solidarity, reflecting broader societal engagement with political discourse.

Within Iranian Shi'i tradition, memorial observances are held at forty-day intervals following a death. This practice was increasingly integrated into civic expression, establishing a recurring pattern of commemorative observance followed by public meeting, then further observance and renewed civic engagement.

On February 18—the fortieth day after the Qom event—commemorative observances and related civic activities took place across twelve cities. Those in Tabriz were particularly notable in scale and intensity [3, 7].

On March 29—the fortieth day after the Tabriz events—similar observances and associated civic activities occurred in fifty-five cities, coinciding with heightened public discourse on governance and social conditions [8].

Thereafter, each successive forty-day interval saw expanded participation, deeper civic engagement, and growing public scrutiny of prevailing political structures [12].

Religious institutions maintained an extensive network of community infrastructure: 8,439 mosques nationwide, 1,147 mosques and commemorative halls in Tehran alone, tens

of thousands of affiliated associations, and 135 bazaar guilds. These venues served as focal points for education, community coordination, and civic dialogue. Their operational continuity supported sustained organizational capacity during this period.

3.5. The Rex Cinema Incident: The Dynasty's Public Opinion Crisis

On August 19, 1978, An incident occurred at the Rex Cinema in Abadan, resulting in the loss of 480 lives and marking a pivotal moment in the period's socio-political trajectory. Initial attributions of responsibility varied across different groups. Subsequent official investigations indicated that the incident originated from actions by individuals associated with extremist religious ideologies, whereas prevailing public perception linked it to state security agencies [4]. The authorities' handling of public inquiries regarding the event contributed to a broad erosion of trust.

The incident deepened societal discontent. Public expressions of concern spread across multiple urban centers. Special measures, including curfews, were implemented in cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz, and security forces undertook operations to maintain order. Concurrently, civic participation in organized events increased significantly, further complicating the governance landscape [11].

3.6. The King's Response: The Limitations of the Carrot-and-Stick Approach

Facing evolving societal dynamics, a strategic approach combining incentives and regulatory measures was adopted, yet it yielded limited results:

Incentives: Legislative proposals for electoral procedures, adjustments to administrative oversight mechanisms, personnel realignments within security-related institutions, restrictions on commercial activities involving royal family members, and the resumption of religious education programs were introduced to foster broader social engagement [1].

Regulatory Measures: Monitoring of religious figures, detention of individuals involved in unauthorized public assemblies, coordination of supportive civic events, and implementation of institutional safeguards were undertaken to uphold public order.

The central challenge lay in reconciling structural continuity with evolving societal expectations. While certain administrative adjustments were made, the underlying governance framework remained largely unchanged, and the pace of institutional adaptation failed to match rising public expectations regarding civic participation and cultural considerations. These partial adjustments prompted increased caution among security and military institutions, while persistent centralization affected confidence among moderate stakeholders. Groups previously aligned with gradual institutional evolution increasingly engaged with broader societal networks, including religious institutions.

International perspectives varied: some diplomatic channels emphasized dialogue and institutional continuity, while others prioritized operational stability and institutional coherence. The resulting policy oscillation diminished the coherence and impact of both approaches, contributing to growing complexity in managing the situation.

Decision-making during this period showed diminishing alignment with rapidly shifting societal conditions. Actions lacked consistency and decisive direction, reflecting internal differences: administrative liberalization coexisted with preservation of traditional institutional frameworks; formal authority was maintained alongside reluctance to deploy broad regulatory instruments during periods of heightened activity. Responses to emerging civic engagement initiatives alternated between accommodation and reinforcement of institutional safeguards, with frequent recalibrations across different stakeholder groups [1].

Consequently, civic coordination strengthened across diverse sectors, while institutional centrality diminished. By the time the gravity of the situation was fully acknowledged, capacity for sustained leadership had markedly declined. Following the transition of responsibilities, the extensive state apparatus—including large, well-resourced security formations—entered a phase of structural reorganization and underwent significant functional realignment. In this context, the transformation of the

political system reflected the interplay of expanding civic coordination, institutional adaptation pressures, and declining capacity for centralized governance continuity [10].

4. Transition and Power Contestation After the Revolutionary Victory: From Pluralistic Co-Governance to Institutional Change (January–December 1979)

Governance Transition and Power Realignment After the Political Restructuring: From Pluralistic Co-Governance to Institutional Consolidation (January–December 1979)

4.1. Phase One: The Exit of the Last Transitional Government (January–February 1979)

The Pahlavi dynasty did not experience an immediate political transition during the period of upheaval; rather, it progressed through its final phases under a concluding secular transitional administration [11, 13].

4.1.1. The Formation of the Bakhtiar Government and Its Loss of Political Support

On December 29, 1978, the Pahlavi administration appointed Bakhtiar, a senior figure in the National Front, to form a cabinet, seeking to manage the transitional period through secular nationalist leadership while maintaining institutional continuity. Bakhtiar stipulated the monarch's departure as a prerequisite for assuming office. On January 16, 1979, the monarch departed Iran. Subsequently, Bakhtiar announced the dissolution of the domestic security agency, the release of individuals detained under prior administrative orders, and the termination of military oversight in civil affairs, aiming to restore stability through measured administrative adjustments.

However, key factions within the National Front distanced themselves from Bakhtiar's administration. From abroad, Khomeini declined to acknowledge its legitimacy, asserting that only a government aligned with the emerging popular movement could represent the people's will [10]. From its inception, the administration operated with constrained backing from state institutions, civil service structures, the general populace, and religious authorities, functioning as an interim arrangement with limited operational capacity in defense, fiscal management, and governance authority.

4.1.2. Military Realignment and the End of the Previous Political Order

On February 1, 1979, a prominent religious figure ended a 14-year period of exile and returned to Tehran, where large crowds gathered to greet him. On February 5, he appointed an interim administration, resulting in a parallel governance structure: an incumbent official retained formal authority over the prime minister's office, while the newly appointed administration rapidly gained broad public, religious, and political support.

Between February 8 and 11, significant shifts occurred across key security institutions, including the air force, gendarmerie, and grassroots military units. Civilian groups assumed control of military installations, law enforcement facilities, and detention centers. The incumbent official subsequently departed the country, marking the definitive conclusion of the prior dynastic system in both *de jure* and *de facto* terms [1]. The interim administration assumed central governing responsibilities, initiating a phase of institutional restructuring and political realignment.

4.2. Stage Two: Dual-Track Power Structure and the Marginalization of Moderate Forces (February 1979–November 1979)

During the initial stage following the political transition, political authority was not concentrated exclusively in the hands of religious leaders. Instead, the political landscape was characterized by the interaction of multiple political forces, the parallel development of two institutional tracks, and considerable internal complexity.

On the surface, the provisional government, a political body composed primarily of secular nationalists and individuals adhering to liberal interpretations of Islamic principles, assumed important responsibilities. It was mainly responsible for state administration, including routine government affairs as well as the formulation and implementation of public policies. In the field of foreign affairs, it represented the country in diplomatic exchanges and cooperation with other states, seeking to establish a favorable

external environment [14]. It was also responsible for restoring social order and promoting stability following a period of considerable political and social upheaval.

In practice, the Islamic Revolutionary Council, led by a group of religious figures centered around a prominent spiritual leader, exercised significant influence within the national political structure [8]. It was involved in the formulation and revision of national laws, participated in judicial decision-making, guided public communication and political messaging, exerted oversight over security-related institutions, and played an important role in mobilizing public support and participation in national affairs.

4.2.1. Bazargan's Dilemma: A "Swordless Sword"

As the leader of the Freedom Movement and a secular intellectual, Bazargan supported institutional stability, inclusive governance structures, and constructive international engagement. He emphasized the importance of maintaining continuity in civil administration and advocated for balanced roles across societal institutions. Khomeini's decision to appoint Bazargan as head of the administration was intended primarily to stabilize the domestic situation, gain support from the middle class, and obtain recognition from Western countries through Bazargan's secular image, rather than to establish genuine power sharing. From the outset, Bazargan's administration faced substantial limitations on its practical authority:

Judicial authority curtailed: In April 1979, specialized judicial bodies were established under religious oversight, with appointed officials serving in judicial capacities. These bodies handled cases involving senior personnel and security service members associated with the former political order, under charges such as "anti-Islamic activities" and "treason." In a number of cases, decisions were rendered outside standard procedural frameworks, significantly reducing the role of the existing civil judicial institutions.

Military authority curtailed: The religious establishment rapidly organized a parallel security force, which operated alongside the regular national defense forces and maintained a direct institutional connection with Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council rather than being placed under the authority of Bazargan [9].

Administrative authority curtailed: The Revolutionary Council appointed liaison representatives to ministries and provincial offices. These representatives could review administrative decisions and participate in personnel appointments and reassignments. Bazargan characterized his administration as a "swordless sword," while the country increasingly experienced fragmented and overlapping centers of authority.

Influence over public discourse curtailed: Religious venues and revolutionary media continued to promote ideas emphasizing adherence to leadership guidance and the primacy of foundational principles over transitional institutional arrangements. At the same time, moderate political forces were criticized by their opponents as lacking sufficient alignment with the evolving national framework.

4.2.2. Pressure from Multiple Political Factions: Moderates, Leftists, and Nationalist Forces

Amid the complex and highly volatile political environment, the provisional administration faced immense pressure from several competing political factions. These compounding pressures contributed significantly to the rapid weakening of its administrative position and overall governance capacity.

Religious conservative factions: This specific group was primarily associated with prominent clerical figures. Its members exercised considerable influence within important state institutions, including the central council, the security apparatus, and the judicial system. They actively sought to reduce the influence of secular political factions and promote a comprehensive governance framework centered on religious jurisprudence. Through their extensive institutional influence, they advanced various policies and strategic initiatives aimed at fundamentally reshaping the national administrative structure.

Left-wing factions: These included various populist and socialist organizations, including specific groups with historical ties to the Soviet Union. These groups strongly criticized the provisional administration, portraying it as representing bourgeois interests and maintaining overly close relations with Western powers. They organized coordinated work stoppages, occupied industrial facilities, and staged public meetings to express their political demands. These significant activities placed additional pressure on the moderate political camp and contributed to increasing fragmentation among different political factions.

Ethnic decentralization movements: These included various regional demographic groups across the nation. Some of these groups demanded greater regional self-administration or, in certain cases, full administrative separation [13]. Security-related incidents subsequently occurred between some of these groups and the central security apparatus, resulting in casualties and property damage. Facing limited institutional and organizational capacity, the provisional administration had difficulty responding effectively to these regional frictions and increasingly relied on religiously oriented institutions to address them. These institutions employed a combination of political, religious, and security-related measures in an effort to restore public order and preserve territorial unity.

4.2.3. Deaths of Key Figures: The Moderates Lose Important Political Support

During 1979, the deaths of two prominent religious figures associated with the moderate political orientation further weakened the position of the interim government [5]. In March, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari was killed; in September, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani passed away. Both had supported a restrained role for religious authorities in governance and upheld the principles of a pluralistic republican system. Their absence diminished internal balancing mechanisms within the revolutionary leadership, contributing to the consolidation of influence by more conservative religious elements.

4.3. *Phase Three: The Hostage Crisis-The Major Decline of the Moderates and the Increasing Influence of Clerical Forces (November 1979)*

On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students entered the U.S. embassy in Tehran and detained 52 American citizens, including diplomatic personnel and support staff. This event drew widespread international attention and significantly influenced the domestic realignment of political authority following Iran's political transition. Superficially, the action reflected differences to U.S. foreign policy orientations associated with the previous institutional framework and called for the return of the former monarch for legal proceedings. However, analyses indicate that the incident also intersected with internal dynamics among competing political and religious factions. Its consequences included redirecting public focus toward external developments, diminishing the authority of the transitional administrative structure, marginalizing centrist political actors, and reshaping patterns of civic engagement and discourse. These developments reinforced institutional centralization and advanced the consolidation of a governance framework integrating religious authority into core state functions. Collectively, these shifts redefined Iran's political landscape and facilitated the emergence of a system in which senior clerical figures assumed decisive institutional responsibilities.

4.3.1. The Bazargan Government Was Forced to Resign Collectively

Bazargan opposed the occupation of the embassy, citing violations of international law and diplomatic norms, and advocated resolution through diplomatic negotiation. Khomeini publicly endorsed the students' action, characterizing it as a pivotal development in Iran's post-revolutionary trajectory and reinforcing its significance within the broader framework of national interests and religious identity.

Amid widespread public sentiment and institutional pressures, the Bazargan interim government submitted its resignation on November 6, 1979.

This transition marked a shift in governance: secular moderates receded from central decision-making roles; administrative, diplomatic, and military functions increasingly aligned with institutions established during the revolutionary period; and Iran's political structure evolved toward one in which religiously affiliated institutions assumed greater institutional responsibility.

4.3.2. The Three Major Political Benefits Brought by the Hostage Crisis

The outbreak of the hostage incident directly contributed to the further marginalization of pro-American, moderate, and change-oriented forces on the Iranian political stage. Those who had advocated resolving the issue through negotiation, seeking compromise solutions, and promoting the modernization process were increasingly criticized by their opponents and, in some cases, labeled as disloyal elements. These individuals not only lost political influence but also became targets of public criticism and were increasingly excluded from the core of political decision-making. This event allowed certain groups to gain greater influence over public discourse, making it significantly more difficult for those holding different views to express their positions. Once they expressed dissent, they could be labeled with terms such as unpatriotic, anti-religious, or pro-American, and consequently face strong criticism and political isolation.

At the same time, this hostage incident also paved the way for the national guidelines referendum held after the event [5]. Taking advantage of the complex situation caused by the crisis, relevant political forces contributed to an atmosphere of heightened national focus and, by emphasizing religious and nationalist sentiment, drew broader sections of society into intense civic engagement. In this context, the Guardianship of the Jurist system was presented as an important institutional choice for safeguarding national interests and core religious values. The resulting institutional arrangement received broad political support during this period, while individuals who expressed reservations faced considerable political and social pressure. This development strengthened the position of more conservative political forces and also significantly influenced the subsequent political direction of the country.

4.4. *Phase Four: Institutional Developments and the Institutionalization of the Guardianship of the Jurist (August–December 1979)*

4.4.1. The Expert Committee: The Role of Clerical Groups in the Institutional Process

In June 1976, the draft framework prepared by the Iranian interim administration emphasized a central executive role, prompting significant engagement from religiously affiliated groups. Subsequently, a specialized body was convened to revise the foundational legal framework, incorporating provisions grounded in Islamic jurisprudence. This body functioned as a formal drafting meeting tasked with establishing the core legal structure, and it later evolved into an enduring institutional mechanism.

In August 1979, a specialized drafting meeting was convened under religious leadership to formulate a republican framework while embedding principles derived from Islamic legal tradition. Diverse perspectives emerged: some participants advocated for a legislative-centered system, pluralistic electoral processes, executive accountability mechanisms, and circumscribed roles for religious scholars in governance. Others emphasized that ultimate oversight authority—encompassing defense, judicial affairs, foreign relations, information communication, and eligibility determinations—should reside with a senior jurist, with legislative and executive functions operating strictly within the boundaries of established religious legal norms.

4.4.2. The 1979 Constitution: The Legal Formalization of the New Institutional Framework

In December 1979, a new foundational legal framework was adopted through a national referendum, formally institutionalizing a system of religious governance.

A key provision stipulates that, during the period of occultation, state leadership is entrusted to a qualified jurist possessing deep expertise in religious law and recognized moral authority.

The highest authority holds a position superior to other state institutions and exercises appointment powers over key security, judicial, and oversight bodies, including the commander of the Revolutionary Guard, the head of the judiciary, and six jurist members of the supervisory council.

The supervisory council comprises twelve members—six jurists and six legal scholars—and is tasked with assessing legislative conformity with religious principles and vetting candidate eligibility, thereby exercising broad oversight. Concurrently, certain secular legal provisions were adjusted, and religious principles were progressively integrated into education, culture, family law, and public life.

This marked the formal completion of a major institutional shift at the legal level—from a republican structure oriented toward secular governance to one explicitly grounded in religious doctrine [14].

4.5. Phase Five: Political Reorganization and Institutional Consolidation (1980–1983)

Following the establishment of the foundational legal framework, a comprehensive political reorganization was undertaken to streamline governance structures and reinforce institutional coherence, resulting in a centralized administrative system characterized by unified leadership, integrated security arrangements, and shared normative foundations.

Restructuring of secular nationalist groups: Organizations such as the National Front and the Freedom Movement were dissolved, and their principal figures were subject to judicial proceedings, relocated abroad, or restricted from participating in formal political life and public discourse.

Measures targeting leftist political groups: Certain leftist organizations were formally designated as incompatible with national legal and social order. Between 1981 and 1983, extensive judicial and administrative actions were carried out, leading to widespread legal proceedings and penalties; thereafter, the political presence of these groups diminished significantly.

Reconfiguration of defense institutions: Senior personnel within the conventional defense establishment underwent systematic review, with many subjected to judicial processes, removal from service, or mandatory retirement [13]. Concurrently, specialized security institutions were reinforced to ensure continuity of institutional functions and alignment with legal framework principles.

Approaches to regional governance: Initiatives involving regional political expressions were addressed through lawful administrative and security mechanisms, while authority over local governance was progressively aligned with national institutional frameworks [1].

Societal integration initiatives: Policies promoting cultural cohesion included standardized public conduct guidelines, restrictions on substances inconsistent with prevailing social norms, limitations on certain forms of public recreation, gender-inclusive educational arrangements, mandatory instruction in religious studies, and centralized oversight of information dissemination channels [6, 7].

By 1983, the political architecture had achieved substantial institutional stability, evidenced by the following developments:

Supreme authority in state affairs was vested in the highest juridical office.

A single political organization held predominant influence within the formal political system.

A specialized security institution emerged as a key pillar supporting national institutional integrity.

Core ideological principles—centered on jurisprudential governance and Islamic ethical foundations—became integral to the national institutional framework [3].

5. The End of the Dynasty and the Institutionalization of the Guardianship of the Jurist

In January 1979, the Pahlavi monarchy concluded; in February, religious leadership returned to the country; in February, an interim administrative structure was formed; by November, moderate political participation had diminished; in December, a foundational legal framework was adopted; from 1980 to 1983, comprehensive political and institutional adjustments were implemented. Iran underwent a broad transformation—from the Pahlavi monarchical system, through transitional and pluralistic administrative arrangements, toward progressively enhanced clerical involvement in governance, culminating in a political system grounded in the principle of jurist-led stewardship.

The principle of jurist-led stewardship introduced a governance framework integrating religious principles into state institutions; shifted foreign engagement toward balanced international relations; emphasized societal development aligned with Islamic ethical foundations; and established a institutional structure in which religious jurisprudence assumed a formalized institutional function.

Elements inherited from the preceding era—including evolving social dynamics, considerations regarding administrative integrity and external coordination, widespread civic engagement, public expectations for institutional responsiveness, transformations in governance norms, and limited capacity among non-religious administrative actors—were absorbed into the emerging institutional landscape and contributed to the shaping of the jurist-led stewardship framework [12].

6. Conclusion

"The gift presented to the Shah" serves as a metaphor for the historical complexities surrounding Iran's modern political evolution. The period associated with Reza Khan and the Pahlavi era featured a centralized governance structure, close external alignment, and a state-led modernization agenda focused on economic and social change. These developments, while transformative, also catalyzed new societal expectations and political activities. In contrast, the post-1979 trajectory did not converge toward a secular democratic model. Rather, following successive phases of political realignment, institutional adaptation, and authority reconfiguration, a system grounded in religious jurisprudence and Islamic principles emerged under sustained leadership.

This trajectory underscores the interdependence of modernization processes, civic engagement, international relationships, and evolving social expectations in shaping large-scale political transitions. It further indicates that the resulting institutional arrangements reflect not only normative aspirations and public discourse but also practical considerations—including organizational coherence, security frameworks, levels of societal endorsement, and formal structural provisions. Through coordinated political action, structural adjustments, and recalibrations in the allocation of authority, the foundational principles of religious oversight were embedded into the governing framework, establishing a distinctive institutional course that has persisted and evolved over subsequent decades.

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