



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Iranians overthrow the Shah, 1977-79

May

1977

to: 10 February

1979

**Country:** Iran

**Location City/State/Province:** *specifically in Qum, Tabriz, Yazd, Tehran, Iсфаهان*

### Goals:

Iranians sought to end the repressive dictatorship of the Shah, who was seen as both corrupt and beholden to extravagant Western governments. Many Iranians were upset by the Shah's administration because, even in the wake of a national oil boom, wealth was unequally distributed. Initially, protestors wanted to reestablish 1906-1909 laws that created a constitutional monarchy. The 1906 Constitution required the Shah to adhere to the laws of Islam and to gain the approval of the Parliament (majlis). Eventually, protestors wanted to overthrow the Shah and install an Islamic, democratic republic. Throughout the campaign, some participants strove to encourage a more Muslim way of life (tabriz) and respect the religious clerics (ulama).

Specific goals of the campaign included the dissolution of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, which was known to violently crack down on any opposition to the government; a public apology by the government for slandering Ayatollah Khomeini in an article published in a prominent newspaper; workers' benefits, wage increases, particularly as the economy began to look shaky; return of Khomeini from exile, where he had been after early agitation in 1964; release of political prisoners; economic independence from foreign countries; and dissolution of the single party system.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 016. Picketing
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 020. Prayer and worship

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 043. Political mourning

- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 060. Suspension of social and sports activities
- 062. Student strike
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 104. Professional strike

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 043. Political mourning
- 046. Homage at burial places
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 004. Signed public statements
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 038. Marches
- 040. Religious processions
- 046. Homage at burial places
- 065. Stay-at-home

- 078. Workers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 162. Sit-in
- 167. Pray-in
- 180. Alternative communication system

## Classifications

### **Classification:**

Change

### **Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

### **Group characterization:**

- Lawyers
- University students
- bazaar merchants
- industrial workers
- oil workers
- poets
- religious leaders
- seminary students
- teachers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

### **Leaders:**

Religious leaders Ayatollah Khomeini, Shari'atmadari and other clerics; Dr. Karim Sanjabi, Foruhar and Bakhtiyar of the National Front party

### **Partners:**

The Writers' Association; the National Organization of University Teachers; Liberation Movement (a political party under the umbrella of National Front; believed in a dynamic Shi'ism that could mobilize masses rather than be directed by the ulama); the Tudeh Party (a political party, severely weakened after an earlier Iranian coup and driven underground by the Iranian government; ideologically aligned with the National Front though far less powerful); Apolitical ulama (even though many of the clerics wished to stay out of politics, they were dragged in by the Shah himself when authorities began to strip the religious establishment of its authority and when the government refused to fight moral laxity); Moderate ulama (led by Ayatollah Kazem Shari'atmadari (senior theologian in Qum), kept open communication with government and desired only that the government abide by its 1906 Constitution, forced to radicalize when the Shah shut down the religious establishment); Militant ulama (led by Ayatollah Khomeini, advocated creation of a clerical Islamic government and wanted ulama to seize political control of Iran); An array of small Marxist and Islamic militant guerilla groups

### **External allies:**

International humanitarian organizations condemned the Shah's regime and the brutal methods of SAVAK

### **Involvement of social elites:**

Religious leaders (ulama) such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Shari'atmadari were the most critical figures in rallying support for the revolution. Revolutionaries would use the social authority of the clergy by yelling quotes from supportive ulama at government soldiers in order to dissuade them from firing on protestors.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- Lawyers
- National Organization of University Teachers
- Seminary Students
- University Students
- Writers' Association

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

- National Front Party

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Seminary Students in Qum

### Groups in 4th Segment:

- Industrial Workers

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 4 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

The Shah

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

### Campaigner violence:

In nearly every demonstration, a few campaigners responded to police aggression with violence.

### Repressive Violence:

Iranian police as well as SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, often cracked down on demonstrations and strikes by shooting at protesters. In Qum, two students were killed during a street protest. In March, during a three-day crisis that followed a commemorative religious service in Yazd, police killed over a 100 protesters. On May 10 1978, police violently repressed demonstrations in 24 towns, with violence escalating noticeably in Tehran and Qum, where troops broke into the homes of religious leaders and killed theology students taking sanctuary there.

Known as "Black Friday," on September 8 the Shah declared martial law in Tehran and other cities and ordered the killing of any demonstrators who refused to disperse.

Death tolls vary extremely depending sources: Khomeini claimed 60,000 civilians were martyrs in the name of the overthrow of the Shah, external estimates cluster around 2,000-5,000 killed

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

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Agitation in Iran was visible by May 1977 in predominantly intellectual circles. A group of lawyers—upset by the government’s interference in the judiciary—drafted a strongly worded manifesto chronicling the legal abuses that had occurred under the Shah’s regime. Poets formed a Writers’ Association to call for an end to censorship and the activity of SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police. A National Organization of University Teachers began fighting for academic freedom while university and seminary students called for academic freedom in the schools.

Leading up to the beginning of the Iranian Revolution, Iranians had grown increasingly disillusioned with the Shah. Many Iranians were upset by the Shah’s administration because, even in the wake of a national oil boom, wealth was unequally distributed. Initially, protestors wanted to reestablish 1906-1909 laws that created a constitutional monarchy. The 1906 Constitution required the Shah to adhere to the laws of Islam and to gain the approval of the Parliament (majlis).

In the first phase of the revolution, much of the nonviolent resistance arose from the creativity of the students. When banned from holding demonstrations, University of Tehran activists stood in silence in front of their library, quietly agitating for freedom of speech. The students also targeted U.S. President Nixon because of his military support of the Shah; they dribbled basketballs on the path of the Nixon-Shah motorcade, an allusion to a popular photograph circulating of Fidel Castro playing basketball.

The National Front party, which had earlier opposed Western domination of the oil industry, was revived in late 1977 by Dr. Karim Sanjabi and called on the Shah to hold free and fair elections, restore the constitution of 1905, respect freedom of speech, free political prisoners, and allow for an independent Iran in foreign affairs. Sanjabi and the two other leaders of the National Front—Foruhar and Bakhtiyar—also accused the Shah of wrecking the economy by neglecting agriculture. By the end of 1977, professionals and students had created organizations, written manifestos, and sent letters to the Imperial Palace, but had not mobilized the support of the nation.

A turning point came on January 7, 1978. A government editorial in a newspaper accused anti-regime clerics of working with communists and the Ayatollah Khomeini of licentious behavior and of being a British spy. In Qum, the headquarters of the ulama (clergy), seminaries and bazaars closed in protest and the ulama staged a protest meeting, articulating their goals as calling for dissolution of the single party and peaceful release of political prisoners. Qum’s 4,000 theology students, in the meantime, initiated street protests but were quickly shut down by the police, who killed two students in the clash.

Khomeini seized this opportunity to congratulate the Qum clergy on their peaceful opposition while he called for more demonstrations. The more religiously affiliated cleric Shari’atmadari called on the country to mourn the students killed in the traditional Islamic manner: forgoing work and attending mosque services on the fortieth day anniversary. This process caused three upheavals to occur in 40-day cycles.

On February 18, 1978, peaceful demonstrations occurred in twelve cities on the fortieth-day anniversary of the death of the Qum students. In Tabriz, after a police officer shot a teenage protestor, angered demonstrators began to attack particular kinds of property that symbolized either the Pahlevi state (police stations and Resurgence party offices) or un-Islamic values (luxury hotels and liberal movie houses). After two days, the military intervened to quash the uprising, which had been the largest public protest since 1963.

Forty days later, on March 29, attendees of a commemorative religious service in Yazd were energized by the words of a fiery preacher, who inspired them to take to the streets shouting “Death to the Shah.” The police again shut down the street protest by firing at the crowd, precipitating a three-day crisis that killed over 100.

Again, Khomeini and Shari’atmadari encouraged Iranians to attend services forty days later, on May 10. On that date police violently repressed demonstrations in 24 towns, with violence escalating noticeably in Tehran and Qum, where troops broke into the homes of religious leaders and killed theology students taking sanctuary there.

Before the next round of fortieth-day services the regime took increasing action; it used the secret police SAVAK to intimidate leaders of the secular opposition while abandoning a few of its most criticized policies and issuing apologies. The regime made economic reforms to cut inflation. These small concessions were enough to temporarily pacify the public, who supported a contented Shari’atmadari rather than Khomeini, who still agitated for overthrow of the Shah.

A major shift occurred in June 1978 when the urban poor and working class people joined what had previously been an upper-middle class movement. Government measures to control inflation had caused an economic recession that affected urban employment. Workers went on industrial strikes throughout the summer, demanding health insurance, bonuses, and wage increases. When employees of Tehran’s electrical system and water system stopped working, they shut down the city. Workers organized demonstrations in Iсфаهان, where the government declared martial law and shot down the demonstrators.

In August, a fire burned down a movie theater with several hundred people trapped inside, and mourners blamed SAVAK even without decisive evidence.

Fearful of another series of forty-day cycles, the Shah made more concessions: allowance of all parties to campaign in the next election was given, amnesty for hundreds of political prisoners was granted, and a new premier Sharif Emami—who would be far more willing to negotiate with the oppositional religious establishment—was appointed.

Sharif Emami came to an agreement with opposition leaders for the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (the feast at the end of Ramadan). He issued demonstration permits in exchange for the protestors’ agreement to demonstrate in a prescribed area and avoid personal attacks on the Shah in their slogans. The feast passed without repression, although 5,000 students staged a sit-in, 700 oil workers went on strike, and countless more Iranians protested in the street.

Despite the opposition leaders’ efforts to dampen the militancy of the demonstrations, the protestors increased their level of enthusiasm and radicalism over the next few days. On September 8 the Shah declared martial law in Tehran and other cities and ordered the killing of any demonstrators who refused to disperse. The blood-letting became known as “Black Friday” and drew the attention of the U.S. government, the Shah’s chief ally. President Jimmy Carter issued a statement backing the Shah. The mass of Iranians drew a different conclusion from the day on which helicopter gun-ships hovered above unarmed Iranians packed into city squares, raining bullets upon them. A critical mass of Iranians reached the conclusion that a full revolution was the only answer.

A wave of strikes in late 1978 shut down the Iranian economy, with peaks on October 6 (when Khomeini was expelled to Paris) and October 16 (the fortieth day after Black Friday). Strikers expanded their articulated goals to encompass political turnover, the abolition of SAVAK, the return of Khomeini, and the end of martial law. Strikers brought bazaars, schools, government ministries, and the oil industry virtually to a standstill.

This proved to be the tipping point for the Shah, whose country’s economy was supported almost entirely by oil.

In December, a giant wave of demonstrators shouted, “God is Great” from their rooftops. When the demonstrators descended to the streets they were rolled over by tanks, marking the first of several bloody clashes between protestors and police that month.

As a concession the Shah appointed former opposition-leader Bakhtiyar as Prime Minister. This was not enough; the campaigners forced the Shah to leave Iran in mid-January. Prime Minister Bakhtiyar dissolved the oppressive infrastructure of

the state, including SAVAK. Under continued pressure he invited back Khomeini, who, upon his February 10, 1979 arrival in Qum, publicly denounced Bakhtiar's conciliatory regime and consolidated power in the Revolutionary Council.

Iranians celebrated the victory by embracing soldiers in the street and stuffing flowers in the barrels of their rifles. Despite the hostile slogan of "Death to the Shah," the Iranians had just led one of the largest nonviolent revolutions in history.

## Research Notes

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### Additional Notes:

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### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Lindsay Dolan, 05/06/2009; revised by Aden Tedla, 02/9/2011

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