

*Land Reform and Social  
Change in Iran*

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At a much earlier time, when the original land reform bill was being discussed by the parliament in February 1960, Ayatollah Borujerdi had written a letter to Ja'far Behbehani, his nephew and a member of parliament, complaining that the bill was ill-advised and contrary to the *shari'a* (religious law) (Akhavi 1980:91). Several *ulama* (members of the clergy) agitated against the 1962 land reform on the grounds that the government should have solicited their opinion on such an important matter. Once the Additional Articles of January 17, 1963, were announced, requiring charitable waqf lands to be leased on ninety-nine-year terms to the peasants cultivating them, certain members of the clergy posed strong opposition (Lambton 1969:105–108). Nonetheless, the majority of the clergy, and particularly the more political and activist circles around Khomeini, did not oppose land reform as such.

Indeed, just these elements of the clergy were wary of the possible success of the government's contention that the opposition was instigated by the landlords, and so they went out of their way to deny any such connections. In a statement issued a day after Khomeini's arrest on June 5, 1963, Shari'atmadari reiterated this theme:

The shi'i ulama have no connections with big landlords and they do not oppose peasants' ownership of land. Contrary to deceitful government propaganda, the interests of the ulama will not be threatened by such ownership; they will be better served. The ulama are more linked to the peasants than to landlords. Our protest against the government concerns the application and implementation of the [reform] law in which, we say, legal and religious conditions must be observed. In any case, our struggles do not principally relate to this [land reform] issue. (Davani n.d.:vol. 4, p. 105)

Even on the issue of waqf land, the clerics rejected the government accusations:

The present ruling elite . . . says that the clergy is against land distribution, because of their hold on awqaf [endowment land]. This is ridiculous. All the awqaf is held by the government. . . . The awqaf of Qa'inat, with its enormous revenues, is held by Mr. 'Alam [then the prime minister]. The big awqaf dedicated to Imam Reza's shrine [in Khorasan province] is all in the hands of the government. Go and contact any of the theological students in Qum and inspect all the books of revenues for the seminaries and see if a penny from the awqaf shows

up there. . . . Go and investigate if a penny from a big or feudal landlord has reached Qum. (Davani n.d.:vol. 4, p. 139)

There was no ambiguity, however, about the clerical opposition to the local election bill, which they opposed on three grounds: first, it removed being a Muslim as a requirement for electors and candidates in these elections; second, in the swearing-in ceremony the Qur'an was replaced by any "holy book"; third, it allowed women both to vote and stand as candidates in these elections.<sup>2</sup> The first two of these changes would allow the followers of minority religions to hold elected offices. In some of the clergy's earlier statements, the issue of the women's vote was considered to be less important. The first protest telegrams sent to 'Alam by Ayatollahs Zanjani, Damad, Amoli, Ha'iri, and Khomeini did not even mention the women's vote (Davani n.d.:vol. 3, pp. 31–32, 40, 96). Davani, himself a clerical participant, recalls the clerical perception of the issue in this way:

The issue of women's vote was but an excuse. The main aim [of the government] was to eliminate the condition of Islam from the requirements of the electors and the candidates so that the road would be opened up for other sects, for Jews, Christians, Zoroasterians, and especially for the astray sect of the Baha'is, those dangerous agents of foreigners in Iran. To facilitate this, they removed the Quran from the swearing-in ceremony and replaced it with "holy book," so that such sects and even members of the Baha'i political party, who call their forged creed a "religion" and consider their book of superstitions a "holy book," could be elected to the provincial councils of the Islamic country of Iran, and could take the fate of Muslims into their hands, by intervening in all public affairs and thus gaining vast prerogatives over the affairs of Iranian people. (Davani n.d.:vol. 3, p. 29)

It is indicative of the outlook of many of the clergy that the election bill, more than the land reform, should have been the catalyst for the emergence of their organized opposition to the shah. From the clerical viewpoint, the changes that the shah had embarked on constituted the final stage in the undermining of the traditional Islamic society first initiated in the mid-nineteenth century by reformist ministers such as Amir Kabir, continued by the constitutionalist movement, and greatly accelerated by the explicitly anticlerical policies of Reza Shah. The links between the controversy over the elec-

tion law, the defense of Islam per se, and the overall historical process of social change were explained by the oppositionists at Qum. For example, in one of his telegrams to the prime minister, Khomeini vividly sketched out what were to become his familiar motifs of foreign conspiracy and internal decadence:

It is incumbent upon me, according to my religious duties, to warn the Iranian people and the Muslims of the world that Islam and the Qur'an are in danger; that the independence of the country and its economy are about to be taken over by Zionists, who in Iran appear as the party of Baha'is, and if this deadly silence of Muslims continues, these elements will soon take over the entire economy of the country and drive it to complete bankruptcy. Iranian television is a Jewish spy base, the government sees this and approves of it (Ruhani 1977:177-178)<sup>3</sup>

When the shah put his six-point program to a vote on January 26, 1963, it included land reform, the women's vote, nationalization of forests and pastures, and a workers' profit-sharing scheme. The clergy interpreted this program as a rejection of their demand for greater influence in the government and as a further attempt to curb the clergy's social influence and political role. They called for a boycott of the referendum. It must be emphasized, however, that no single plank in the program was the sole cause of the clerical boycott. Rather, the clergy voiced their fears of the project as a whole. In their eyes, the shah's program was a final assault on Islam. The clergy saw it as the rejection of the clerical demand to reverse the course of the previous decades and to move in an Islamic direction. The existential tone of the declarations of the time make this evident, as this statement by Khomeini demonstrates:

People who are responsible to the law and to the nation have fooled His Majesty into doing this job for them. If they want to do something for the good of the people, why do they not turn to the program of Islam and Islamic experts, so that all classes will enjoy a comfortable life, and so that all will be happy in this and the other world? Why are they instituting cooperative funds that are robbing the fruits of the peasants' labor? With the establishment of these cooperatives, the Iranian home market will be lost, and both merchants and farmers ruined, while other classes will suffer a similar fate. . . . The clergy registers the danger for the Qur'an and our religion. It seems that this compulsory referendum aims to lay the basis for the removal of the clauses [in the constitution] linked to religion. The Islamic ulama had previously felt

the same danger to Islam, the Qur'an, and the country when the government took measures to change the local elections. Now it seems that the enemies of Islam are trying to achieve the same thing through fooling a bunch of naive people. (Davani n.d.:vol. 3, pp. 205-206)

The postrevolutionary practice of the clergy in power, since February of 1979, vindicates this evaluation: the clergy has done much to Islamicize both Iranian society and the state, including the place of women in society and politics. The clergy has not reversed the land reform. On the contrary, the politically dominant faction within the ruling bloc has been trying to pass a land reform legislation through the Majlis that would sanction land takeovers by peasants since 1979 and would deal with lands exempted from the shah's earlier reform measures. Only on the issue of the waqf lands, for obvious religious reasons and not because of financial considerations, has there been discussion of declaring any previous land reform transactions void.

#### APPENDIX C

##### CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE OF RURAL HOUSEHOLDS

Table C-1 has been constructed on the basis of annual surveys published by the Plan Organization on consumptive expenditure of rural households. The data for all selected years have been reduced to six expenditure categories, because for the period 1966-1970 the six categories comprised the extent of the published data. Other years included a wider classification, ranging from nine to twelve groups. The expenditure groups are defined differently from year to year, and in the absence of accurate information on rural consumer price indexes, it is not possible to make accurate comparisons. The reduction of other years to six expenditure groups is, therefore, partly arbitrary, although a general measure of changing expenditure patterns has been taken into account.