

Iran: Some Basic Facts

Useful Terms:

Shah-King

Faqih-Supreme leader

Majlis-Parliament

Republic-A state in which the political leader is not a monarch or other hereditary head of state. In modern times the leader is usually a president.

Theocratic Republic-A system of government in which the leader of the government is thought to have divine guidance.

Official Language: Western Farsi (also called Persian) *many more spoken*

Population: 72,048,000

67% urban, 33 % rural (1996 census)

Government: Theocratic Republic

Religion

About 99 percent of the Iranian people are Muslims. About 95 percent of them belong to the Shi`ah branch of Islam, which is the state religion of Iran. Most of the rest belong to the Sunni branch. Iran's largest religious minority is the Baha'is. Consisting of about 250,000 Iranis, the Baha'is have never had legal recognition in Iran and are forbidden to practice their faith. Iran also has some Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrianians (followers of an ancient Persian religion.) The Islamic government has little tolerance for Iran's religious minorities. Baha'is in particular have been severely persecuted.

Way of Life

The Islamic government strongly influences the Iranian way of life. It restricts freedom of speech and other civil rights. Islamic clergymen hold many key positions in government, and all perspective candidates for governmental positions must be approved by the government prior to running for office. All laws are reviewed by the government to ensure they don't violate Islamic law. All judges on the Supreme Court are members of the Islamic clergy. The government bans all forms of entertainment that it considers to be un-Islamic. All newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV are strictly controlled by the government. The government requires schools to stress the teachings of Islam. Iranian women are required to follow an especially strict code of public behavior and dress. An Iranian woman must wear a *chador* which is a cloth that covers her body, head and sometimes half of her face.

Governance in 20th & 21st centuries

Iran was ruled by the Qajar Dynasty from 1794-1925. In 1906, amid demands from many Iranians, the Qajar monarch gave Iran its first constitution and Parliament (Majlis).

The Qajar government was overthrown 1921. In 1925 Reza Khan became Shah and changed his family name to Pahlavi. Reza Shah introduced many programs to modernize Iran and free it from foreign interference. Politically, the shah exercised nearly absolute control over the government and his vast power aroused much opposition. His critics denounced him for denying freedom of speech and other civil rights and for using a secret police force—the SAVAK—to crush opposition to his rule. Many conservative Muslims believed that the shah's modernization programs violated traditional Islamic teachings.

During World War II, Iran declared its neutrality. When Iran refused to cooperate with the Allies' use of their Trans-Iranian railway, British and Soviet troops invaded Iran and forced Reza Shah to give up his throne. In his place, his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became shah.

In the late 1970s opponents of the Shah organized under Muslim religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and forced the Shah out of Iran. Upon the Shah's departure, the revolutionaries took control of the government and Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic Republic. He and his followers began setting up a new government based on Islamic teachings. Hundreds of officials of the Shah's government were tried and put to death. The Islamic government shut down newspapers and magazines, banned political parties, closed universities, and placed restrictions over the people's personal freedoms. A new constitution made Khomeini the *faqih* (supreme leader) of Iran. In 1980, the Iranian people elected the president and the first Majlis of the republic.

Ayatollah Khoemeini died in 1989 and Iran's top religious leaders selected Ali Khamenei (who, until then, had been Iran's president) to succeed him as *faqih*.

In a general election held in 1997, Iranian voters elected Mohammad Khatami, a former minister of culture and a political moderate, as president.

In parliamentary elections held in 2000, members of reform groups won a majority of seats in the Majlis. Measures supported by these groups included less government influence over Iranians' personal lives. Khamenei and members of Iran's ruling clergy resisted many reforms proposed by Khatami and the Majlis. The Council of Guardians rejected many reform bills, and conservative judges shut down several reformist newspapers.

In 2004, conservatives regained control of the Majlis and in 2005 voters elected Mahmoud Ahmadenijad, a political conservative, president.