


The Rise of Modern Despotism in Iran: The Shah, the Opposition, and the US, 1953–1968

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“This work is interested in detail,” writes Ali Rahnama in the preface to his newest book, *The Rise of Modern Despotism in Iran: The Shah, the Opposition, and the US, 1953–1968*, and readers should consider themselves forewarned (p. 1). They should not, however, be deterred. As creative and sensitive in his interpretations as he is meticulous in his research, Rahnama offers a forensic analysis of the history of the last shah of Iran’s drift into dictatorship, guiding us skillfully through Iran’s political history, from the aftermath of the 1953 royalist coup d’état to the shah’s triumphant, Napoleonic coronation ceremony in 1968. Chronicles of the late monarch’s steady consolidation of power in his own hands and the stifling of dissent are now legion, of course. But rarely has detail been marshaled so effectively in demonstrating these points.

There is little in this book that calls into question the received narrative about the shah’s regime. And yet, perversely, this is what makes it so timely. We are living through an age of what can only be called “Pahlavi revisionism,” a tendency in some scholarly quarters to recast the shah as misunderstood, masterful, or manipulated by forces beyond his control, with the exact basis of the apologia often changing. This nostalgia for the ancient regime is perhaps understandable, given the repressive character of the Islamic Republic that has followed it. But Rahnama is clear-eyed in his refusal to join in the nostalgia. According to his narrative, every time the shah was given the choice, between 1953 and 1968, he clearly chose autocracy over democracy, consistently disparaged his own people as incapable of mature political participation, and missed opportunity after opportunity to introduce the kind of political reforms that might have saved his own crown.

But this is no polemic. Rahnama is deeply empathetic to the shah’s perspective, and goes out of his way to appreciate how the turbulent premiership of Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951–53) must have left the young king with an enduring sense of trauma and lingering mistrust of popular politics. He is also scathing, at times, about the shortcomings of the liberal opposition. Rahnama’s discussion of the failures of the National Front senior leadership in the early 1960s, and the unraveling of the last, best opportunity Iranians had for peaceful democratic dissent, is one of the strongest sections of the book. Rahnama is also nuanced in his presentation of Iranian politics, avoiding excessive focus on the shah himself and instead revealing the richness and complexity of the system over which he ruled.

The book’s center of gravity, overwhelmingly, is the period from 1961 to 1963, which occupies approximately 60 percent of the book’s page count, and which Rahnama portrays as a pivotal moment in Iran’s transition into despotism. In his telling, though, the defining feature of these three years is not so much a sudden lurch toward dictatorship by the shah as it is a crumbling of the moderate opposition, leaving room for more radical and implacable expressions of dissent by a smaller minority of activists, which the regime was easily able to crush.

The discussion of this process is utterly gripping. Rahnama nicely demonstrates how the Second National Front in 1962–63 had become so stuck on its two traditional principles of anti-colonialism and democratic proceduralism that the shah was easily able to blindside them from the left with an ambitious program of land reform, winning love and admiration from a rural demographic that had largely eluded the more urban, middle-class National Front.

All of these events, in turn, Rahnema explains, were part of a larger series of transformations that took place during the critical period from 1961 to 1963. Politically, we go from the shah's experiment with tolerating opposition during the reformist government of Prime Minister Ali Amini to the rise of the technocratic but sycophantic New Iran Party, reflecting an almost complete consolidation of the shah's power. On the opposition front, meanwhile, the mantle is handed decisively from Mosaddegh to Khomeini. Rahnema brilliantly chronicles the failures of the old generation of National Front leaders, showing how popular momentum slowly leaked away from their legalistic cautiousness and toward a new generation of more religiously inspired radicals.

A minor quibble with this otherwise enlightening section of the book is that Rahnema occasionally tips his hand too much as a sympathizer with the youth cadres of the Mosaddegh generation. He uses the provocative (and highly partisan) term *nekbāt* to describe the 1953 coup, for example. And in almost every disagreement and confrontation between the radical youth wing and the more cautious senior leadership of the National Front in the 1960s, the latter is presented as ossified, accommodationist, and unimaginative, while the young activists come across as prescient in their understanding that the regime was beyond reform. This interpretation is basically correct, but it also benefits from the advantage of hindsight. In the early 1960s, National Front leaders, like Karim Sanjabi and Allah-Yar Saleh, had good reason to believe that a constructive and nonconfrontational attitude to the regime might be more successful in edging it toward reform than the volatile rhetoric of student activists. If they failed, it was largely because their approach was tried, and given more room to fail.

If there is one puzzling aspect of the book, it is how little the United States features in the story. From the title and the introductory material, we are led to expect a tripartite analysis of regime-opposition-US relations, but, for the most part, this book turns out to be about Iranian domestic politics, with the US only periodically woven into the narrative. For example, the three years that form the core of the book (1961–63) coincide almost exactly with the presidency of John F. Kennedy, who had a famously contentious relationship with the shah. Yet, it is striking how little the Kennedy administration and its archives actually enter the narrative. US ambassador Julius Holmes, whose tenure also coincided almost perfectly with this three-year span, only makes a few token appearances in the nearly 300 pages dedicated to it.

This absence, perhaps unintentionally, becomes one of the more thought-provoking aspects of the book. Rahnema seems to take for granted the outsized role played by the US in shaping the shah's regime, a perfectly defensible position, but detailed descriptions of how this process took place are strikingly infrequent in a book that is otherwise so rich in detail. This begs the question: Is this a careless framing, a shortcoming in the author's analytical framework, or a reflection of something deeper? Is the US, in other words, even so central in this story after all? The significance of the US to domestic Iranian politics is not a difficult case to make, but it is never explicitly argued for here. The lone exception, perhaps, is the fascinating description of the shah's sudden and enthusiastic conversion to the cause of land reform after the departure of Amini in July 1962, which Rahnema ascribes almost entirely to pressure and manipulation from the US. But detailed descriptions of this kind are infrequent enough that Rahnema leaves himself open to critiques from Pahlavi revisionists keen to fetishize Iranian "agency" at every turn.

Given the immense and impressive level of detail in discussing the intricacies of Iranian domestic politics, the reader is left wondering if this book might not have been stronger if it had simply left out the US altogether. But this is a minor critique. On the whole, Rahnema has written an important and insightful treatment of Iranian political history in the 1950s and 1960s, a period that is often glossed over superficially in the rush to connect the 1953 coup to the shah's autocracy in the 1970s, but which actually marks a critical moment of transition for Iran.