POLITICAL ECONOMY / IRAN

What Could an Iranian Revolution *Change?*

Liberty, work and the wealth of a free Iran



Mr Peyman Bakhshayesh

MD, PhD, MBA

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Mr Peyman Bakhshayesh is an Iranian-born trauma surgeon and writer based in Leeds. This book develops his essays on national cohesion, property and the economic choices facing a free Iran.

PREFACE

An opening in Abadan

I was born in Abadan, a city whose name calls oil to mind. Ask what Iran might give the world after the fall of the Islamic Republic and someone will usually mention the oil. I would start in the same city, with a different question. Suppose a young engineer in Abadan knows how to make a pump that is cheaper to repair. What would it take for her to see it working?

She needs a workshop willing to make the part. She needs a customer willing to try it. If the customer is a public water company, she needs a fair chance at its business. She may also need somebody to lend her the first month's rent. The drawing might be hers alone. Almost everything that turns it into a working pump depends on the society around her.

This woman is an imagined example. The choice before Iran is real. I wrote in *Liberation of the Resources* that a country can possess almost everything it needs and still keep its people from one another. Here I want to follow that thought further. Which institutions would give a person without property the freedom to become an owner? What do those who succeed owe those who are still waiting for a chance? And why might the answers Iran gives matter to anyone beyond its borders?

I have lived in Iran and Europe. I work as a trauma surgeon in Britain. Those experiences have left me with an attachment to individual initiative and an equally strong attachment to the help a person sometimes needs before they can act for themselves. Both belong in my vision of a free Iran.

CHAPTER 01

When quantity becomes quality

Long before Karl Marx wrote about revolution, people had changed how they lived together. The language of quantity becoming quality, familiar from Hegel and later Engels, helps me describe what I see in those changes. Enough small gains in knowledge and cooperation can eventually give people a power of an entirely different kind. And the movement runs the other way. Once a new freedom is established, many more people can put it to use. [1]

Take the long transition to agriculture. Families learnt which seeds to save, how to tend animals and how to store a harvest. These changes took place over generations and in different regions. A settlement able to feed people through the winter could support people who spent more of their time making tools, building or trading. Then the toolmaker could make the farmer more productive. The first change was a greater, more dependable supply of food. The deeper change was a different way of living together. It also mattered who controlled the storehouse. [2]

I see a related opening in the Renaissance. Scholars recovered and compared texts, artists studied the body and readers encountered rival accounts of the world. Many of those people were believers. What interests me is the room they made for a person to study a question and reach a judgement of their own. A teacher who acquires that freedom can pass it to a whole room of students. I want that freedom for every classroom in Iran. [3]

The French Revolution brought a political version of the same question into sharp focus. In 1789 the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen set out a principle with practical consequences. A public position should be open to citizens according to ability. Industrialisation had its own history and had already begun in Britain. What I draw from France is the challenge to inherited rank. Once a family name loses its legal claim on an office, a country can look much further for the person who might fill it. [4]

This is what I mean by a revolution that releases resources. The resources were there before the reform. The farmer already knew the soil. The student already had the question. The citizen already had the ability.

CHAPTER 02

Who owns the next opportunity?

Imagine two children born in the same street. One will inherit a workshop, its tools and a list of paying customers. The other will inherit none of them. Both may be free before the law. Only one can walk into the workshop on Monday morning and begin. That difference is the strongest question the critics of private property have put to those of us who defend it.

When Adam Smith examined the wealth of nations, he took aim at the habit of counting a country's gold and silver as a measure of its prosperity. Look instead at what people can produce, exchange and use. David Ricardo brought distribution into the foreground. Of the product of land, labour and capital, how much goes to the landowner, how much to the worker and how much to the owner of capital? A country can become wealthier while leaving the second child in our street with very little room to move. [5]

Proudhon gave his challenge its memorable form in 1840. “Property is theft!” He distinguished the possession a person uses from a proprietor's claim to benefit from what others produce. Marx approached the problem through the working day. A worker sells the capacity to labour for a wage. In Marx's account, part of the day produces value equivalent to that wage. The worker continues, and the additional value goes to the owner. A contract can be honoured to the letter while, in Marx's analysis, exploitation continues. That is the force of what I would call the hidden appropriation of someone else's work. [6]

I take the child's predicament seriously and reach a different conclusion about the workshop. I want the first family to be able to keep what it has built. I also want the second child to be able to train there, earn a proper wage, save, borrow on fair terms and one day compete for the same customers. If the owner can have a rival's licence refused by making a telephone call, we have protected a privilege. If an apprentice has no remedy for unpaid wages, the freedom to sign a contract means very little. The defence of enterprise begins with opening that second door.

CHAPTER 03

What happened to socialism?

Marx saw a tension between what people had learnt to produce together and the arrangements governing who owned the product. Industry brought workers together, made their labour interdependent and gave them the possibility of organising as a political force. He and Engels paid close attention to Germany's revolutionary prospects. Their criticism of the German school called “True Socialism” in the *Manifesto* was precisely that it lifted ideas out of the conditions that gave them meaning. The earlier *Holy Family*, subtitled *Critique of Critical Criticism*, was a different polemic. The thread I retain is Marx's insistence on what people can actually do under the conditions in which they live. [7]

The Russian Revolution put a different answer into practice. After the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, ownership and decision-making increasingly passed to the state. Under Stalin, the state directed investment and production on a vast scale. Moscow also expected Communist parties abroad to follow priorities set by the Soviet leadership. I call the resulting concentration of economic power state capitalism. That is my judgement about who controlled capital. Imagine standing at a factory gate in a workers' state and having no independent means of challenging the authority that determines your conditions of work. In what meaningful sense do you own the factory? [8]

European social democracy offers another inheritance. Socialist reformers and workers' associations had roots in the nineteenth century. Later, reformists such as Eduard Bernstein argued for change through democratic institutions. The Soviet challenge sharpened the political stakes in Europe, but the argument for social insurance and parliamentary reform was already well established. Schools, libraries, housing and school meals made that argument tangible. A child who has eaten lunch can concentrate. An apprentice who can borrow a book can continue learning after work. [9]

I value those gains. I also see the strain when governments keep increasing the burden on the people expected to finance them, especially when a business can move its next investment abroad. The Soviet Union disappeared in 1991. The elementary question survived it. Can we narrow the distance between the two children in our street while giving both the strongest possible reason to build something of their own? I meet people for whom the word *socialism* carries the memory of that single-party state. They want customers, a shop of their own and the right to keep what they earn. I share those ambitions. My use of the word begins with their freedom to act.

CHAPTER 04

What Iran learnt in 1979

I was a child when the revolution came. I grew up with its consequences and with the war that followed. Looking back, I am struck by how readily people who agreed on removing the Shah assumed that agreement would carry them through the morning after. In my view, the alliance of parts of the left with the Islamists was one of the great political failures of modern Iran. The Tudeh leadership backed Khomeini. Its calculation that the left could benefit from the new order ended in the regime's repression of the party itself. [10]

I still see that error when parts of the left make common cause with Islamist organisations under the banner of Palestine and give too little thought to the kind of government their allies would build. A Palestinian family's claim to safety and liberty is clear to me. It is precisely the liberty I ask for an Iranian family. My quarrel is with those who use that cause to excuse clerical power, or treat disruption of an economy as an achievement in itself. When I describe that politics as anarchic, I mean the habit of tearing down institutions without accepting responsibility for what comes next. Proudhon's argument about ownership deserves to be read on its own terms.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Taliban in Afghanistan arose in different places, in different decades and under different conditions. What I ask of anyone judging such a movement is simple. What happens to the woman who wants to teach, to the member of a religious minority who wants to study, and to the citizen who publicly disagrees? Iranians have paid dearly for the failure to ask those questions in time. [11]

Much of the record is already public. The UN fact-finding mission examining the repression of the protests that began in September 2022 found unlawful killings and acts amounting to crimes against humanity, including persecution on grounds of gender. It documented how gender discrimination intersected with ethnicity and religion. A free Iran could open records, protect witnesses and give families a proper hearing. People abroad might then understand more of what Iranian families have carried in private. Whatever their politics, citizens must be able to tell the truth about the state and live safely afterwards. [12]

CHAPTER 05

A company of one's own

Imagine that any adult in Iran could register a company, alone or with others, at a modest cost. A mechanic could sell repairs, a programmer could license software and a translator could invoice for a day's work. A group of nurses could form a cooperative. Each could earn under a name of their choosing, keep accounts and pay tax on profits under rules written in plain language. That right should be as ordinary as opening a bank account.

Return to the engineer in Abadan. She registers her business and takes her drawing to a machinist. He quotes for the first batch. Their agreement records who owns the design, what counts as a working part and when he will be paid. A local water utility publishes a small order for replacement pumps. She can read the specification and see how bids will be judged. Her rival might win on price or reliability. She should be able to discover which, and use that knowledge when the next order comes round.

She may also fail. Perhaps her pump is too expensive to maintain. She needs a fair way to settle her debts, sell the remaining stock and try something else. The machinist is entitled to pursue a bill she owes him. A business register, working courts, real competition and fair insolvency rules matter to these two people more than a minister's speech about entrepreneurship.

Employment must remain a genuine choice. The mechanic who wants a wage, paid leave and the right to bargain with colleagues should have all three. An employer should gain nothing by telling a worker to become a company on paper while continuing to dictate every hour of their day. I want people to have more control over their working lives, including the freedom to choose a secure job.

A government will need income. It can tax profits and personal income under published rules, explain how it treats money retained for investment and prevent people from disguising wages as company earnings. I would judge any proposed rates against two questions. Can the country pay for the services it promises? Can an ordinary person who wins a second customer see a clear benefit from doing the extra work? A finance minister owes the public an answer to both.

CHAPTER 06

The price of a first chance

In my earlier study of poverty I used the example of a tailor without equipment. Consider what happens if we give a trained tailor a sewing machine. She may begin earning immediately. Or the machine may sit idle because she has nowhere to work, nobody has shown her how to price an order, or the first customer wants thirty uniforms and will pay only on delivery. People with experience can often identify the obstacle in half an hour. An office a hundred miles away might send a second machine.

This is where private citizens have a particular responsibility. A retired business owner could help the tailor work out what the cloth and her time actually cost. A school could give her a fair opportunity to tender for its uniforms. A local association could guarantee the first small loan and publish what happened to its fund. A successful tailor could later take on an apprentice. These are modest acts. Together they change who gets to enter a market. They also make it harder for those already doing well to say that everyone else has had the same chance.

As a trauma surgeon, I think of someone whose injury makes their former job impossible. A sick note can record the loss. It cannot pay for a bus with accessible boarding, persuade an employer to offer shorter shifts or put the person's skill to use in a different role. Those things take thought, money and another human being prepared to act. Some people will need support for the rest of their lives. The right to live with dignity must survive illness, disability and the loss of earning power.

My proposal gives both public institutions and individuals a job they can answer for. The state should guarantee the essentials, including education, health care and income protection when work is impossible. Citizens can supply knowledge, introductions, apprenticeships and patient capital that a tax system alone cannot provide. Publish what each programme costs. Ask former participants whether their income rose, whether they could keep working, and what would have helped sooner. If the answer is safe transport or a school meal, budget for that. The person who lives with the difficulty often knows exactly where the money would do the most good.

CHAPTER 07

What holds a free country together?

In *National Cohesion* I argued that no Iranian should have to surrender a language or a peaceful belief to belong fully to the country. There is an economic side to that argument. What persuades one person to pay for a library used by somebody else's child? Part of the answer is national belonging. If I expect my children and yours to inherit the same country, I have a reason to care about the quality of the school in your town. Japan and Israel interest me because, for all their differences, both invite a serious discussion about how a sense of national continuity can sustain shared effort. Iran has its own history, languages, faiths and disagreements. We will have to find an answer that Iranians recognise as their own.

My preference is a secular constitutional monarchy, and I support Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. I also want a republican to be able to defeat my preferred candidate in a parliamentary election, run the water utility competently and take full credit for doing it. In *Pahlavism, Technocracy, and National Reconciliation in Iran's Transition* I wrote about the distance between symbolic loyalty and the harder work of government. A nation that appoints an inferior engineer because he repeats the right slogans has chosen to waste its own money and talent.

There are several habits I would teach together. Productivity asks what useful thing we can make or improve. Responsibility asks who will put it right when it fails. National awareness asks who else in Iran lives with the consequences. Global awareness asks what somebody abroad already knows that we would be foolish to ignore. Cohesion is what allows a water engineer in Khuzestan, a programmer in Tehran and an Iranian specialist overseas to act on the answers together.

For example, give a technical college an open problem in water maintenance. Students can learn programming and use artificial intelligence to look for patterns in repair records. Then send them to hear from the people who service the pumps. A model that recommends a part nobody can buy locally will teach a memorable lesson about the limits of a clever answer. Let the students publish their findings, including their mistakes. Let another college try a different design. This is what freedom of inquiry, modern education and loyalty to Iran look like when they meet in a classroom.

CHAPTER 08

How the world would know

What would make an Iranian revolution a world event in the deeper sense I have in mind? Other countries would have to see something worth learning from. The fall of the Islamic Republic would command attention. Attention lasts a short time. A reliable institution can be copied for generations.

Begin with things a citizen can check. Can a woman register a business without a political sponsor? Can a small supplier collect an overdue payment from a public body? How long does an appeal take? Can students anywhere in Iran study the same scientific material available to their peers abroad? Publish the answers by region. Count the firms still trading after two years, then ask why the others closed. Speak to employees as well as owners. Did wages arrive on time? Could people who became ill keep their homes? These are measures of power passing into the hands of citizens.

Imagine an Iranian-designed pump winning a contract abroad. The company earns an export customer, the machinist gets a repeat order and the local college has a real problem for its students to work on. An Iranian living overseas can introduce the firm to a buyer without being asked to declare allegiance to a faction. An Israeli engineer might share experience of a similar water problem. Friendship between peoples acquires a practical meaning when both can point to something they have made better together.

I call this a new socialism because I still care about the question that gave socialism its moral force. What freedom does the child without an inheritance actually have? My answer puts ownership within reach of more people, protects the person who earns a wage and gives those who succeed a responsibility towards those coming after them. I want a society in which a poor child can grow up to be a prosperous employer and an employer's child can grow up understanding why public schools deserve the family's taxes.

One day I would like someone to ask what became of that young woman in Abadan. The finest answer would be quite ordinary. She tried the pump. The first one leaked. She fixed it. A customer came back. An apprentice walked through her door. If Iranians can make that answer ordinary, people far beyond Iran will have reason to pay attention.

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Liberation of the Resources

The starting point for this book. Iranians already possess the knowledge, savings and experience that rebuilding requires. The question is who gets to contribute.

Reconsidering Poverty, Class Inequality and Socialism in the Contemporary Era

My longer study of productive assets, workers' rights and the position of those who cannot work. The tailor in chapter six returns to a problem I explored there.

National Cohesion

On belonging to the same country across differences of language, belief and political preference.

Can a Marxist Support Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi?

On workers' interests and the possibility of democratic cooperation among Iranians with different political traditions.

Pahlavism, Technocracy, and National Reconciliation in Iran's Transition

On what a government owes citizens who do not share its political outlook, and why public competence matters after a transition.

Cover illustration: an imagined workshop in Abadan, created for this edition with AI-assisted artwork.