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THE REVOLUTION IN THE IRANIAN SHIA CLERGY: DEMOTION OF AYATOLLAH SHARIATMADARI

Keywords: *Shariatmadari, Khomeini, Shia clergy, Velayat-e Faqih, Iranian Revolution*

Abstract

Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari (1906-1986) was one of the leading figures of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and one of the few senior Shia clerics with a political vision different from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Shariatmadari was a traditionalist cleric and did not support Khomeini's concept of Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the Islamic jurisprudent).

Shariatmadari had a considerable political influence, especially in his native Tabriz, and the Islamic People's Republican Party, associated with him, was one of the prominent parties participating in the revolution. The party is also worth mentioning because there were a few non-Khomeinist Islamist parties during the revolution.

However, a figure like Shariatmadari was a challenge for the regime, and in 1982, he was implicated in an alleged coup attempt and banished from political life, dying four years later in house arrest.

More importantly, Shariatmadari was demoted from the rank of Grand Ayatollah, which was a sign of another revolution by Khomeini, this time in the Shia clerical hierarchy. Shariatmadari's demotion was an indication of a new era in the Iranian clerical hierarchy, in which the clerical ranks were decided by the country's political power.

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Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari (1906-1986) was one of the leading figures of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and one of the few senior Shia clerics with a political vision different from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Shariatmadari was a traditionalist cleric and did not support Khomeini's concept of Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the Islamic jurisprudent). Despite his support for the revolution and Khomeini initially, Shariatmadari did not support the way the new political system was organized and Khomeini's vision of the Islamic Republic.

Shariatmadari had a considerable political influence, especially in his native Tabriz, and the Islamic People's Republican Party, associated with him, was one of the prominent parties participating in the revolution. The party is also worth mentioning because there were few non-Khomeinist Islamist parties during the revolution.

However, a figure like Shariatmadari was a challenge for the regime and in 1982 he was implicated in an alleged coup attempt alongside Sadeq Qotbzadeh, once a confidant of Khomeini and former foreign minister. Subsequently, Shariatmadari was banished from the political life and died four years later in house arrest.

More importantly, Shariatmadari was demoted from the rank of Grand Ayatollah, which was a sign of another revolution by Khomeini, this time in the Shia clerical hierarchy. The 1979 Revolution saw the break in the traditional clerical hierarchy with some clerics finding their promotion through the state and political power, rather than the traditional system of the Iranian Islamic seminaries. Shariatmadari's demotion was an indication of a new era in the Iranian clerical hierarchy, in which the clerical ranks were decided by the country's political power.

Traditional Shia clergy and the theory of Velayat-e Faqih

Since the Safavid dynasty in Iran declared the Twelver Shia Islam as the state religion, the Shia clergy had maintained its place in the Iranian social system. According to the Twelver Shia Islam, the Islamic community must be guided by mujtahids during the absence of the twelfth Imam Mahdi. The highest rank among the Shia clergy is called Marja' al-Taqlid (Arabic for "source of emulation), or Marja'-e Taqlid in Persian (Marja' for short). Marja's are also referred to as Grand Ayatollahs. However, as Shias were mostly a minority during the centuries, many Shia clerics espoused quietism, i.e., non-involvement in politics.

The Shia clergy increased their power in Iran during the Qajar era, having great influence over many political and social matters, including in the judiciary and education. However, the quietism was still dominant among the high-ranking Shia clerics. This does not mean that there were no politically engaged clerics until the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For instance, there was Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi during the Tobacco Revolt in the 1890s, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri during the Constitutional Revolution or Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani during Mohammad Mosaddeq's rule as the prime minister. The 1906 Constitution also spoke of the role of the Shia clergy in the political life, as it included a council of five mujtahids that had to supervise the legislation.¹

However, the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini and his Velayat-e Faqih theory shook the previous fundamentals of the clergy-state relations, as the theory dictated not only political involvement, but also the clerical rule. It also argued for a rule by a single Islamic scholar, whereas collective leadership was previously common in Shia Islam. Despite the hierarchy, there is no single highest cleric in the Twelver Shia Islam, and there are always multiple Marja's at a time, some of them based in Iraq. Some of them might have more personal authority, but they do not have a higher rank and cannot demote another Marja', at least that was the case before the 1979 revolution.

The Shia clergy had a difficult relationship with the Pahlavi dynasty in the 20th century but there was some cooperation between them. The most authoritative Marja in the mid-20th century, Ayatollah Hosein Borujerdi, was a follower of quietism.² It was after his death when Khomeini began his active campaign against Mohammad Reza Shah, with the first episode being the 1963 revolt against the Shah's White Revolution.³

Khomeini and Shariatmadari were the two senior clerics after Borujerdi that were actively involved in politics, with the former being more radical. Khomeini was arrested in

¹ "Constitutions and Constitutional Debates," Iran Data Portal, accessed September 12, 2025. <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/constitutions-and-constitutional-debates>.

² Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: Tauris, 1989), 19.

³ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 21.

the crackdown of the revolt, but is saved from the execution, as his colleagues, particularly Shariatmadari, recognize him as a grand ayatollah, forcing the government to back down rather than face the fallout for killing a cleric of this rank.⁴

Khomeini was exiled to Iraq, where he formulated his Velayat-e Faqih theory. The theory was in opposition to the existing collective leadership among the Shia clergy and promoted a single faqih ruling the Muslim community and the state as a supreme leader.⁵ This was unacceptable for traditionalist clerics, such as Shariatmadari, because Khomeini was equating his faqih to an infallible imam – an uncommon idea in the absence of the Imam Mahdi.⁶ Khomeini was also called imam by his followers and the Islamic Republic later.⁷

Ayatollah Shariatmadari and the Islamic Revolution

Historian Ervand Abrahamian lists the movements in the 1979 revolution into six groups: Clerical populists, clerical liberals, lay-religious liberals, lay-religious radicals, secular liberals and secular radicals. He puts Khomeini and his followers in the clerical populist category, while describing Shariatmadari and his supporters as clerical liberals.⁸ Until the last moment, Shariatmadari supported preserving the monarchy, albeit the constitutional monarchy envisaged in the 1906 Constitution.⁹ He thought that the Shia clergy must have played a role in the political life, but the state should be ruled by an elected government, supporting the idea of popular sovereignty.¹⁰ The seeds of the confrontation between Khomeini and Shariatmadari were already seen in the 1960s when the followers of the two clashed in Qom over the missionary activities.¹¹

When the anti-Shah protests began in early 1978, Khomeini who still lived in exile soon became universally considered as the leader by various religious or non-religious groups. The anti-Shah coalition was quite broad, and some Islamists also did not share Khomeini's ideas. Therefore, many moderate Islamists could consider themselves under the umbrella of more moderate Shariatmadari.¹² Even Khomeini needed to adapt his theory to the revolutionary reality and accept elected bodies, such as presidency and parliament, but still under the control of the supreme leader and his supervisory bodies.

At the same time, Khomeini was rejecting any offers from the Shah and his government, so that there would not be any links of legitimacy between his and the Shah's governments. Moreover, Shariatmadari's compromising positions were overwhelmed by the revolutionary radicalism. The Shah also failed to engage in a significant dialogue with

⁴ Kenrick Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology: The Views of Shari'atmadari, Taliqani, and Khumayni" (PhD diss., Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, 1990), 20.

⁵ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 22.

⁶ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99.

⁷ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 101.

⁸ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 42-47.

⁹ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 27.

¹⁰ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 29.

¹¹ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 96.

¹² Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 113.

him to save the situation, and even two of Shariatmadari's followers were killed in an attack by the government's forces on his house in Qom in 1978.¹³

However, while eventually supporting the revolution and downfall of the Shah's government, he maintained differences with Khomeini. He urged Khomeini to reject the title of imam and criticized the name of the new system – the Islamic Republic.¹⁴ Following the revolution, Shariatmadari's supporters formed the Islamic People's Republican Party (IPRP), as opposed to the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) founded by Khomeini's followers.¹⁵ The IRP clearly had much greater influence, but the IPRP was popular in the provinces of the Iranian Azerbaijan, where Shariatmadari was from.

Ayatollah Shariatmadari and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic

The main confrontation between the two ayatollahs came with the new constitution and its inclusion of Velayat-e Faqih in it, culminated in the December 1979 revolt in Tabriz, the main city of the Iranian Azerbaijan. In August 1979, Iran held elections for the Assembly for the Final Examination of the Constitution, which was overwhelmingly won by Khomeini's followers.¹⁶ Khomeini himself was initially welcoming to the idea to submit a draft constitution, based on the French Constitution, to the referendum without the constitutional assembly¹⁷, as he did not need to derive legitimacy from the elected bodies – he was already the supreme leader.

However, many groups and political figures were arguing for the constitutional assembly. Shariatmadari was also pushing the idea of a large assembly with 270 members, while Khomeini preferred 45 members. In the end, he agreed to 75 members, offered by Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani,¹⁸ another influential clerical leader of the revolution popular among the Islamic Left. The Constitutional Assembly convened in August, and its initial draft was close to Shariatmadari's ideas – elected president and parliament with the clerical supervision – but Khomeini's supporters later introduced the Velayat-e Faqih theory into the document and enshrined it in the 1979 Constitution.¹⁹ It was approved in the referendum in early December.²⁰

The period of the constitutional debates was very conveniently coincided by the Tehran hostage crisis, when the Students Following the Imam's Line seized the US embassy on 4 November 1979 and took the American diplomats hostage. The move, welcomed by Khomeini, further radicalized the situation. The authorities were using documents uncovered by the hostage-takers in the embassy to discredit opponents.²¹

¹³ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 118.

¹⁴ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 27-28.

¹⁵ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 45.

¹⁶ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 54.

¹⁷ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 74.

¹⁸ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 35.

¹⁹ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 36.

²⁰ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 151.

²¹ Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 90.

Shariatmadari condemned the taking of American hostages in November²² and criticized the draft of the constitution²³, which led to the boycott of the referendum from his supporters and low turnout in the Iranian Azerbaijan.²⁴ Two days later, his home in Qom was attacked, causing uproar among his supporters and the Tabriz revolt.²⁵

Hundreds of thousands protested in Tabriz, clashing with the pro-regime groups, and took over the government buildings and the radio. At the same time, they did not directly oppose Khomeini.²⁶ During the revolution, Khomeini maintained the position of an arbiter and opposition groups, while directly confronting the regime, were trying to avoid challenging Khomeini. A similar thing happened in Tabriz, several days into the revolt, some of the protesters repented going against Khomeini. After that, the authorities and pro-Khomeini groups managed to regain control over the city and quell the protests, although the unrest continued into January 1980.²⁷ The IPRP was shut down,²⁸ while some eleven protesters were executed in January.²⁹ Shariatmadari himself was not very active during the unrest, urged his supporters to remain calm and avoid violence, and his hesitation might have also been one of the reasons behind the failure of the Tabriz Revolt.³⁰

Demotion of Shariatmadari and the Revolution in the Shia Hierarchy

The state continued discreditation campaign against Shariatmadari, which culminated in implicating him in a plot alongside the former foreign minister, Sadeq Qotbzadeh. Qotbzadeh, Khomeini's close aide during his exile in France and return to Iran, was arrested in April 1982 and accused of planning a coup. Under pressure, he named Shariatmadari as a supporter of the plot. Shariatmadari's son-in-law was also arrested.³¹

Shariatmadari was also paraded on state TV to repent his crime, with the forced confessions being a usual occurrence in the Islamic Republic since the 1980s. Shariatmadari did not confess to the crime but apologized for not reporting rumors, which he said he had initially dismissed, to the authorities. However, the state declared his remarks a confession and strengthened the discreditation campaign against him, including accusing him of Azerbaijani separatism.³²

However, the most important attack against him came from Khomeini, who defrocked him the status of Marja' and grand ayatollah in summer that year, approved by

²² Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Postrevolutionary Iran a Political Handbook*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 12.

²³ Abbott, "Contemporary Shi'ism as Political Ideology", 36.

²⁴ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 140.

²⁵ Boroujerdi, *Postrevolutionary Iran*, 12.

²⁶ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 140.

²⁷ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 140.

²⁸ Boroujerdi, *Postrevolutionary Iran*, 12.

²⁹ Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, "A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution," *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980): 368.

³⁰ Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 90

³¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 157.

³² Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 158

17 of 45 professors in Qom seminaries.³³ It was an unprecedented move, and as historian Ervand Abrahamian puts it, the Islamic Republic did what no Shah ever dared to do.³⁴ Shariatmadari was put in house arrest and died in 1986.

The Islamic Revolution ushered in a revolution in the Shia clergy;³⁵ it offered a swift social mobility for low-ranking clerics. They could seek promotion through political means rather than the traditional system. One of the best illustrations of this was when the then-President Ali Khamenei was selected as the next supreme leader after Khomeini's death in 1989.³⁶ Not only was Khamenei not a Marja', a requirement for the supreme leader in the Constitution, but he was not even an ayatollah yet.

The designated successor for Khomeini, Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, was sacked months before Khomeini's death because he opposed the massive execution campaign in 1988. Since there was no other Marja' within the high echelons of the establishment, the requirement was removed, while Khamenei started to being referred as Ayatollah overnight.³⁷

The political influence over who is referred as an ayatollah and who is not has continued to this day in the Islamic Republic. For instance, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the influential figures in the country who later became Khamenei's rival, was called an ayatollah by his supporters, but not by the state officials and media.³⁸ Even President Ebrahim Raisi (2021-24), whose office and supporters referred to him as an ayatollah, was called a *hojjat ol-islam* (a rank lower than an ayatollah) by Khamenei's office,³⁹ despite him being Khamenei's protégé.

In the 1990s, Khamenei also sought to attain the Marja' title but was opposed by some other Marja's.⁴⁰ Dissident Iranian cleric Mohsen Kadivar called his political push to obtain the title the "trivialization of the Shia marja'iyat".⁴¹ However, this political expediency over the Shia hierarchy goes with Khomeini's ideas of politics having priority over religion.⁴² This is one of the reasons why some scholars refrain from calling Iran a theocracy, despite being led by a clerical establishment.

³³ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 156.

³⁴ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 58.

³⁵ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 98

³⁶ "Shocking Video Clip From 1989 Shows Khamenei Elected Only for One Year as a Caretaker." Radio Farda. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, January 8, 2018. Accessed September 12, 2025. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/video-showing-khamenei-election-supreme-leader/28963611.html>.

³⁷ "The Overnight Ayatollah: Khamenei's Fight to Become a Spiritual Leader," Iranwire, September 16, 2020, accessed September 12, 2025. <https://iranwire.com/en/special-features/67605/>

³⁸ "هاشمی رفسنجانی؛ آیت الله یا حجت الاسلام؟" ("Hashemi Rafsanjani: Ayatollah or Hojjat ol-Eslam?") Radio Farda. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, September 12, 2007, accessed September 12, 2025. https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f2_religious_ranking_in_iran/411598.html

³⁹ "آیا ابراهیم رئیسی آیت الله است؟" ("Is Ebrahim Raisi an ayatollah?") Rouydad 24, October 5, 2023, accessed September 12, 2025. <https://www.rouydad24.ir/fa/news/350260/>

⁴⁰ Olivier Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 2 (spring 1999): 207.

⁴¹ "Ebtezal-e Marja'iyat-e Shi'a (the Trivialization of Shi'i Authority: Impeaching Iran's Supreme Leader's Claim to Religious Authority)," Mohsen Kadivar, May 1, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2025. <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/11131>.

⁴² Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," 207.

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