How the Poor Become Revolutionaries: Suburbanites and Squatters of Tehran in Islamic Revolution of Iran

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Islamic revolution of Iran (1979) was accomplished by notably various contributors, including low income groups. Suburbanites and squatters are their main representatives in Tehran. They were mostly immigrants to the capital in 1960s and 1970s that chose margins due to Improving communication routes and implementation of settlement limitation in main part of Tehran, however some of them merged to the poorest neighborhoods. Like every other group in those years, the urban poor in Tehran were incited by their own situation and conditions and were considering their own demands and motives on which this research focuses. We make a model according to retroductive methodological strategy in a reciprocal relation with data that is gathered through exploring newspapers, unsolicited documents and three supplementary interviews with a reputable merchant of Bazar, an active clergyman and a main member of Islamic charities. Researchers conclude that Tehran suburbanites and squatters were incited by economic dissatisfactions, ties with Islamic and revolutionary charities, religiosity and spread of Islamic Ideology. They eventually were brought into political tensions by leftists’ violent way of fight and great greeting ceremony for Ayatollah Khomeini. Finally we provide some suggestions to other researchers.

1. Introduction

Revolution is alteration to another situation in which violence leads to formation of a new political organization in a given society. Releasing from suppression and establishment of freedom are often the main pillars of

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revolution (Arendt, 1963). It is also the description of what happened in Iran in 1970s (Madani, 1383). Downfall of Pahlavi regime is one of the most iconic revolutions in 20th century led by religious and nationalist groups and personalities, notably Ayatollah Khomeini, but broadened to other Iranians, even the poor and unlettered.

Tehran was the heart of the revolution, so that is why the journalists and historians have focused on this city in their reports and records. There were different groups of habitants who lived in Iran’s capital teamed up with revolutionaries, sooner or later. Because of their beliefs, needs, economic and social positions, every group was considering its own dissatisfactions and it is one of factors that led to multiple theories about the event. Our research is focusing on urban poor people in Tehran including suburbanites and squatters, especially in south of the capital.

Villages’ absence in almost all of Iran revolutionary events in 1970s was an outcome of vast migration of farmers to cities, while increasing population of migrants in large cities intensified government inefficiency. So “urban poor and rural migrants took part in mass demonstrations against the government and sometimes these demonstrations led to violent street conflict with police and army”. However it is worth to say that they are often mere numbers of other leading groups (Ashraf & Banuazizi, 1387: 110-112). Regarding to these facts, our main question is which conditions and motives pushed suburbanites and squatters of southern Tehran to join revolutionaries.

First and after putting forward the literature review and research method, we describe features of the group on the verge of Islamic Revolution and then turn to factors that we realized as three aspiring conditions of the poor in Tehran to join the political unrest.

2. Literature Review

There are few works about factors that incited the urban poor to join unrests in Tehran on the verge of Islamic revolution. Street Politics is an admirable book from Asef Bayat (1997) in which he explains the situation of poor people in the capital since rise of Pahlavi regime in 1920s. Only in 3rd chapter he focuses on years of 1970s and points at two provocative factors: Municipality of Tehran demolished shelters in marginal neighborhoods and Islamic cooperative
companies and local councils had a charming effect. It is true but undetailed and even unfinished story, since he pays little attention to cultural factors and violent leftist clashes, so didn’t present a comprehensive explanation. That is why he looks at the revolutionary acts of the poor as a mere temporary explosion while it continued after February 1979 in new ways due to other factors that we mentioned.

Another scholar is Parviz Piran (1380) who has operated several surveys in deprived neighborhoods of south of Tehran after the Islamic revolution but what about the pre-revolution events? Piran just explains that imposing an exogenous development model by Shah¹ in Iran gave priority to expanding middle class in large cities, so farming sector was weakened and farmers were forced to immigrate and serve urban industries while their immigration worsened the conditions of urban economy especially in Tehran’s house market. It is clear that he has not used any methodological strategy to bring up an explanation about pre-revolution events.

The last one is a thesis by Bagher Hussainpour (1387): The Role of Urban Suburbanites in Islamic Revolution of Iran. At first he compares theories of revolutions according to Islamic revolution of Iran and then he focuses on cultural factor only and explains some Shiite concepts like entezar² and nahy-az-monkar³. Not only he has not clarified the way by which the poor was influenced by these concepts, but also he has not mentioned any other motives of suburbanites and squatters to become revolutionaries.

No one of these three works listed and explained variant dissatisfactions and demands of Tehran suburbanites and squatters in a well-documented and comprehensive way through a specified methodological strategy to explain how they joined revolutionaries step by step.

3. Methodology

Squatters tend “not to be literate, so they seldom documented their affairs” (Neuwirth, 2005: 180). As we need to search about 1960s and 1970s, we study mainly unsolicited documents presented by ruling establishments and some

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¹. Kings of Iran and some near countries were called Shah.
². To Wait for the redeemer of humankind
³. To dissuading someone from doing something that is forbidden
explorer researchers from Iran and abroad. Furthermore, we refer to newspapers and periodicals published in 1978-1980 and also interview a reputable merchant of Bazar, an active clergyman and a main member of Islamic charities to complete our data.

After gathering these data, we search for the situation and main conditions that resulted in emergence of “the revolutionary poor” as a social phenomenon, so we make a model through retroteuctive strategy in a reciprocal relation with data. Here is an example of this strategy:

“There is an unusual phenomenon called B. But B is usual if A is true. So it is justified to say A is true. Our gathered data verifies that A is true.” (Blaikie, 1993)

Worth to say that we don’t specify “causes” for a “social” phenomenon, but main conditions and motives. There is human actors in these phenomena, so we search for the situation or any condition that logically results in any motive in the actors to be somehow or do something (Little, 1991).

4. The Situation of Tehran Suburbanites and Squatters in 1970s
On the verge of Islamic revolution of Iran, there were increasing number of immigrants who move to more modern cities especially the capital seeking better professional conditions and more money. They merged with the urban poor and settled in margins and squatters. A column titled The Revolution Leans on Indigents words “They are most Suppressed and deprived groups of our people that have been devoid of literacy, learning, professional education, employment opportunity, any health care and often any food. We can’t describe it as it is and you should go to south of Tehran, to temporary shelters, near and far rural and urban communities to see how these honest and resistant people with five to ten of their families live in a ten square meters room.” (Quarterly Ommah, 23 May. 1979: 7)

Growth pace of Tehran margins was slow until the end of 1950s but speed up then specially because of land reform. Most of them were migrant villagers (Naghdi, 1386). Only 9.4% of Iran GDP in those years belong to villages vs. 53.6% for towns (Katouzian, 1981), so it was not wondering that an urban family’s income was four times more than a rural one (Ashraf & Banuazizi, 1387). Founding new factories in same years quickened migration to large cities
and increased urban part of GDP in 1978 to 88% while rural part decreased to 9% (Khaleghi Damghani, 1385).

Improving communication routes coincided with implementation of settlement limitation in main part of the capital steered two thirds of immigrant to choose margins (Khatam & Athari, 1386). Mansour Ghomsheh, one of the main members of Islamic Charities in Tehran Told us the story of Dowlatabad street in south of the capital. Thousands of immigrants chose this long street in 1970s connecting Tehran to Rey and settled in squatters beside the street, so made it as a linear camp (personal interview, Aug. 14, 2017). Tehran suburbanites’ detailed data that published by research institute of Iran urbanism ministry are available in Table 1. Most of the names now became satellite towns.

Like in the margins, there were squatters in the main part of the capital. One of them was Ali Kazemdookht hired by Tehran municipality as a gardener, however forced to sweep streets. Ali had migrated to the capital when his workshop in Hamedan, a province in the west of Iran, went bankrupt. He was 45 years old when interviewed, living with his family in a 35 square meter squatter (Daily Islamic Revolution, 1 Aug. 1979)

Squatters were making living in nonproductive jobs as vendors or ticket-seller and unskilled professions like carrying and constructing. Some of them were involved in illegal activities specially drugging (Naghdi, 1386). These low income workers in Tehran (suburbanites or squatters) are estimated by Ashraf and Banuazizi to be 0.5 million on the verge of Islamic Revolution (1387). Bayat says 15000 of them were vendors in central streets of the capital like Lalezar, Ferdowsi and Sa’di (1997).

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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
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<td>Karaj</td>
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<td>1248</td>
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<td>Shahriar</td>
<td>Soltanabad</td>
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<td>Ghal’e mir</td>
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5. Roots of “The Revolutionary Poor” and Their Motives

It is clear that in an inquiry into the emergence of a “social” phenomenon, we search for some resulting conditions, roots and motives instead of causes. In this article and according to gathered data, we focus on four main conditions: economic dissatisfaction, influence by Islamic ideology, ties with Islamic and revolutionary charities and some events that brought the poor into political tensions.

5.1. Economic Dissatisfaction

Poor peoples are usually unsatisfied with their economic situation, but it is different to economic dissatisfaction because of government policies. Shah began to interfere in economic policies of cabinets in 1963 openly, so logically he was being accused of misleading investments and distributions through 1960s and 1970s.

Economic Gap

Average income of Iranian families began to improve due to increasing oil price in early 1970s but that average improvement was related to soaring wealth of the privileged, not all Iranians.

“perhaps obvious examples of unjust wealth distribution are muddy uninhabitable shacks in southern Tehran that are unsanitary, without access to electricity, sewage system and healthy water, not far from palaces, apartments and villas in north of Tehran” as we read in Weekly Ferdowsi three months
after the revolution, continuing by “in recent two years workers and even middle class forced to pay 40-50% of their income to rent a house while many Iranians suffer from lacking calorie” (Quarterly Ferdowsi, 16 Apr. 1979: 8-9). Regarding to north-south streets that connect poor neighborhoods to luxurious houses in north of the capital, A given household could take a trip (to find a job, see the modern capital he had heard about, etc.) and feel the economic gap.

Failed Land Reform

As Abrahamian says, *White Revolution*\(^1\) was formed by Shah to prevent a communist Red Revolution, but it ended up in an Islamic revolution (2008). Land reform was among most iconic parts of *white revolution of shah and the people* that not only decreased Iran farming production, but also resulted in forced migration of thousands of deprived farmers and their families to large cities.

Although farmers were suffering from poverty and economic instability before governmental land reform (Lambton, 1953), they used to consider Shah the blamable because of his intervention in the process that first was led by a popular Prime Minister Ali Amini. Land reform act was ratified by Iranian Senate until May 1960 and implemented since 1962 by Arsanjani, farming minister in Amini cabinet (Hooglund, 1982). Core of the act was buying vast farms from wealthy landowners to distribute them between poor farmers and to found rural cooperative companies.

In the first phase of the program when land reform organization was directed by Arsanjani, northwestern provinces (Azerbaijan, Gilan & Caspian) experienced a rapid and accurate process (Lambton, 1969). Just after five months, however, Amini was obligated by Shah to resign, one reform agent was killed in Fars, five amendments of the act were declared and one of army officers was appointed as farming minister (Hooglund, 1982; Lambton, 1969).

Reform agents were replaced by military officers familiar with influential landowners not rural people. Since then, land reform act was implemented to the advantage of landowners and government, not farmers, e.g., Landowners were allowed to rent out farms instead of granting them. So more than 15 thousand farmers turned to laborers incurring loss if stay in villages, tens of

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\(^1\) A Reform package that was presented by Shah and executed by Iranian governments in 1960s and 1970s.
thousands lost their homes to foreign investors that went bankrupt some years later (Hooglund, 1982; Lambton, 1969; Katouzian, 1981). It was not surprising in a 1971 survey that four from seven migration motives that was stated by respondents in marginal neighborhood of Hasirabad belonged to same issues: poverty, unemployment, drought and tending to prosperity (Naghdi, 1386).

**Fluctuant Price of Urban House**

Migrants to the capital alongside the urban poor were hopeful to find a suitable home for their family regarding high oil prices and new budget ratified by ruling establishments but governmental and private investments in housing sector deteriorated price instability. Although hoarders and migrants were blamed, Amir-abbas Hoveyda’s Cabinet resigned finally while one of demands of people was “high cost of house and lack of it” (Daily Ettela’at, 10-16-17 Aug. 1977). It was true that migrants took part in that complicated problem: “some of constructors got housing loans and they benefited from keeping house prices high falsely”, but they were attracted to this area of investment considering rural migrants and squatters as low wage construction workers (Daily Ettela’at, 9 Aug. 1977). therefore The More migrants were absorbed to large cities to work in construction stations, the less they could find suitable house with suitable price.

**Demolition of Shacks around the Capital**

Suburbanites and squatters from southeast to the west of Tehran used to exploit the nearest neighborhood for illegal electricity usage. In summer 1977 the cabinet decided to destroy their shelters, sent bulldozers, lorries and soldiers to Tehranpars, Majidieh, Shemiran-e-no, Narmak, Afsarieh, Moshirieh, Kavoosieh, Soleimanieh, Mesgarabad, Dowlatabad, Aliabad, Cheshme Ali and other areas (Bayat, 1997). It was declared formally that “illegal houses around Tehran will be destroyed” due to “new changes in cities’ comprehensive map directed by the Queen” (Daily Ettela’at, 16 Aug. 1978).

Disorder in the event recorded by Savak\(^1\) one month later when deputy director of education administration of Tehran addressed a meeting in the office of Rastakhiz\(^2\) party: “homeless people sold whatever they had even their fan to

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\(^1\) Main organization of Iranian intelligence in 1956-1979

\(^2\) The main body of one party system established and dissolved by Shah in 1970
build a house. They got construction authorization and queue up in Narmak for brick transfer while there were tens of trucks full of bricks, ready to get 1 Toman\(^1\) for every brick and there were masons ready to work in return for 100 Tomans an hour. But suddenly municipality began to demolish shelters… and the homeless retaliated by damaging some property of municipality” (archive of documents center: 00067069)

Tehran mayor and prime minister were replaced in same month to reduce tensions and new mayor alongside Sharifememi -new prime minister- had a meeting with Shah in which the king sympathized with whom their shelters were destroyed (Daily Ettela’at, 18 Aug. 1978).

5.2. Ties with Islamic and revolutionary Charities

Mosques in southern Tehran used to establish same funds to help the poor at least since Foumani, imam of a new mosque in Korasan street, Founded “10 shahi\(^2\) a day cooperative company” and distributed small cans to gather public donations. He was spending the money to hold gathering and learning programs for the poor in 1940s and 1950s, as his son told us (personal interview, Aug. 30, 2017). However, It was on the verge of Islamic revolution that Islamic charities activity recorded a peak. Unsatisfied by shah’s policy to support large foreign investing in factories and to ignore some Islamic laws, merchants of Tehran Bazar tended to revolutionaries and revisionists in 1960s and 1970s specially Ayatollah Khomeini and Freedom Movement (Skocpol, 1982). They also were founders of charities that suburbananites and squatters were one of their main clientele. So their opposition to government damaged its popularity among the urban poor.

Ali Asghar Rokhsefat was one of the revolutionary merchants in Tehran and explains how they found a charitable fund named Javid after they consulted with Ali Falsafi, the Imam of Lorzadeh mosque, south of Tehran. When the poor got aware of the new Islamic charity by radio, huge population gathered in Javid only in 7 hours. That greeting incited him and his colleagues, Rokhsefat says, to found many other charities including tens in the capital and its margins (personal interview, Aug. 21, 2017).

\(^1\) Informal unit of Iranian money that is equal with 10 Riyal, the formal one.

\(^2\) 2000 “shahi”s are equal to 1 rial, the currency of Iran.
There were other kinds of charities consisted of goods distribution networks named Consumption Cooperation that activated in 1978-1979. Until the end of 1978, there were nearly 25 same networks in southern areas of the capital: Bab Homayoun, Khazaneh, Khorasan, Shadshahr and etc. (Bayat, 1997). In midst of strike in Iranian oil industry, oil was distributed by same networks to heat houses in winter of 1979 (Daily Keyhan, 16 Jan. 1979). The revolutionary youth founded and directed those networks in Tehran neighborhoods to prevent famine and inflation due to tensional conditions. The initiative reinforced their influence among the urban poor.

There were some sporadic but conspicuous aids from Islamic revolutionaries. For example Clergymen Ghayoori and Tavassoli built houses for settled immigrants beside Dowlatabad street during 1975-1979 Following Ayatollah Khomeini’s Directions. Mansour Ghomsheh Remembers that some of these poor immigrants participated in Revolutionary demonstrations during 1978-1979 who was putting on plastic bags instead of shoes (personal interview, Aug. 14, 2017).

5.3. Religiosity and Influence by Islamic Ideology
Islamic ideology not only charmed whom had been displeased by Shah, but also provoked Iranian people to be revolutionary. It used to benefit from old concepts in new way like Jihad\textsuperscript{1}, Ommah\textsuperscript{2}, Imam\textsuperscript{3}, Beyt-ol-mal\textsuperscript{4}, Istikbar\textsuperscript{5} among others (Debashi, 1385) and criticize many aspects of western modernity, e. g., liberalism, enlightenment, globalism, individualism, pluralism and even nationalism (Bashirieh, 1387). It seems that Islamic ideology was the reaction of traditional classes to emerging modern groups supported by Pahlavi Regime. This is also common among religious organizations in several developing countries to take part in political changes through defending their followers’ interests like social justice and freedom of assembling (Rakodi, 2004: 90). Furthermore, Washington decision in 1953 to overturn Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, the popular and democratic-chosen prime minister of Iran, muzzled

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1. Sacred fighting  
2. Nation of Islam  
3. The leader whom Muslims are ordered to obey  
4. The budget of nation of Islam  
5. Arrogance in enemies of the God and people
liberalist and nationalist elites and gave the chance to Islamic groups to lead the protests against government (Elm, 1992).

Being familiar with Islam in their birthplace, it is worth to note that regarding vast illiteracy in suburbanites and squatters, they were incited by Islamic ideology through revolutionary clergies who had served Ayatollah Khomeini as apprentices. They organized a comprehensive publicity network consisted of young activists especially in the capital and its margins, transmitting Islamic ideology and leaders’ messages to the mass. Ayatollah Khomeini himself used to stress on details of difficult situation of life for suburbanites and squatters in his speeches (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385) and so his apprentices. For example as we read in a Savak documented report, known clergymen Sheikh Ahmad Kafi gave a speech about Islamic social justice on 16 December 1967 at “Foroutan mosque in Khorasan street” and said “a dog had died in Tajrish1 and his owner spent four thousand Tomas for its funeral but in south of the capital a woman has forced to pledge her earrings in a bank to get thirty Tomans as a necessary loan” (archive of documents center: 01309023).

It was not by chance that Kafi focused on social justice. Revolutionary clergymen in Tehran used to gather at least twice a month and coordinate their activities. Sheikh Mostafa Foumani, son of a challenger speaker, says that sometimes more than 50 clergymen was gathering in his father’s house in Khorasan street (personal interview, Aug. 30, 2017).

Regarding their rapture from traditional rural relations, it is not wondering that migrants to the modern capital have sought shelter in a meaningful ideology which regulates their beliefs in a new way of social life and justifies their fight for interests. So they greeted publicizing of this ideology in mosques and takaya2 in southern Tehran and accepted great ayatollahs as referent group.

We draw your attention to several interviews in newspapers, including one that is done in November 1979 with Hassan an illiterate rural migrant from Damghan that was at the time a middle-age suburbanite of Tehran. The interviewer heard that “we can’t ourselves have a judgment. We absolutely are

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1. a privilege neighborhood in northern Tehran
2. Plural of Tekiye that means a sealed salon to mourn the killing of Imam Hussain (p.b.u.h) the grandson of prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h) and his family and loyal lovers in Iraq in 7th century.
dependents on Mr. leader’s orders… he is successor of our prophet and Imam Hussain. So people should do whatever he asks for” (Daily Mizan, 13 Sept. 1980: 6).

5.4. Bringing Suburbanites and Squatters into Political Tensions

Leftist Islamic and Marxist groups are the most supporters of violent clash with Pahlavi regime in 1960s and 1970s. Although Tehran suburbanites and squatters almost didn’t have organizational relation with those revolutionaries, they were brought into political tensions by leftists’ violent way of fight. Some banks exploded, some of American counselors assassinated and some of foreign economic offices were targeted. Meanwhile several events like these happened in center and south of Tehran, e.g., the explosion of Rey municipality in 1978 (Bayat, 1997).

Another example: a leftist Islamic group named Badr launched a demonstration in cover of a mourning crowd in main streets of Rey, south of Tehran with this slogan: “The blood in cask is boiling because of nobility / that you should uproot the slavery state... I am martyr of religion”. Guardsmen warned them not to continue but they kept doing until the main square in which statue of Shah was shining. Demonstrators then changed the slogan to: “Hussain is the king of religion / Yazid is overturn”. Next day, some of Badr’s members were arrested (Amjadi, 1383: 165-166).

Last squatters and suburbanites forced to take step together with revolutionaries during and after the great greeting ceremony for Ayatollah Khomeini, main leader of the revolution, from Mehrabad airport to the southern cemetery of Tehran where he gave a famous deconstructive speech on 1 February 1979 (Abrahamian, 1395). It is the Beginning for many of them and they remained as a political actor for months and even years after the revolution.

6. Conclusion

Every social group that joined to Iranian revolutionaries in 1960s and 1970s was considering its own demands and motives. The vastest Iranian community of suburbanites and squatters in those years were settled in Tehran and Its

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1. The king who ordered the Killing of Hussain (p.b.u.h) the grandson of prophet Mohammad (p.b.u.h) in 7th century.
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margins and many of them took part in the revolution of 1979, less or more. They were incited by three conditions: economic dissatisfaction, ties with Islamic charities and spread of Islamic ideology. They were also brought to the scene of political tension by violent clashes of leftist groups and finally by the great greeting ceremony for Ayatollah Khomeini in south of the capital.

There was a reciprocal relation between the urban poor and revolutionaries. Main leader of the change, Ayatollah Khomeini, besides religious charities and speakers and leftist groups had several programs either to resolve difficulties of suburbanites and squatters’ life immediately or to benefit them after the overturn of Shah. That reciprocal relation facilitated mass mobilization of urban population on the verge of Islamic Revolution.

Model 1 that explains the emergence of “The Revolutionary Poor” in Tehran as social phenomenon. Situations and Conditions are shown in squares and Motives are shown in a circle.

This inquiry provides some suggestions for other researchers. Taking step together with revolutionaries is a beginning for many of the urban poor. A researcher may question about the ways in which this approach continued by suburbanites and squatters after the revolution and compare their role in post-revolutionary events of Iran to the role of same social groups in other revolutions. Considering drastic competition between political parties and organizations in post-revolutionary Iran, it is interesting to know which one made a plan to attract the urban poor in large cities like Tehran and to what extent was successful. Furthermore, one may do research in the field of political culture and ask about the current shared views, Feelings and judgments of
Tehran suburbanites and squatters regarding political system, political processes and Iranian politicians.

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