

After the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, Pahlavi aligned Iran with the Western Bloc and cultivated a close relationship with the United States to consolidate his power as an authoritarian ruler. Relying heavily on American support amidst the Cold War, he remained the Shah of Iran for 26 years after the coup, effectively keeping the country from swaying towards the influence of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union.

Beginning in 1963, Pahlavi implemented a number of reforms aimed at modernizing Iranian society, in what is known as the White Revolution. In light of his continued vocal opposition to the modernization campaign after being arrested twice, Khomeini was exiled from Iran in 1964.

However, as major ideological tensions persisted between Pahlavi and Khomeini, anti-government demonstrations began in October 1977, eventually developing into a campaign of civil resistance. In August 1978, the Cinema Rex fire became a catalyst for revolutionary movement.

On 16 January 1979, Pahlavi left Iran and went into exile. On 1 February 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran and was welcomed by thousands. By 11 February 1979, the monarchy was officially overthrown.

Following the March 1979 referendum, Iran officially became an Islamic Republic. In December 1979, Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of Iran.

The Iranian Revolution was unique because it happened quickly, was widely popular, and replaced a pro-Western monarchy with an Islamic theocracy based on the concept of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist).