



The Legitimacy Paradox in the Pahlavi State: An Analysis of the Consequences of Authoritarian Modernization and Cultural Engineering

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received: 2025/08/01
Received in revised: 2025/08/01
Accepted: 2025/10/26
Available online: 2026/5/16

Keywords:
Legitimacy Paradox,
Pahlavi State,
Authoritarian Modernization,
Cultural Engineering,
Patrimonialism, Fragile Political
Order

ABSTRACT

Objective: This article seeks to trace the roots of the legitimacy crisis in the Second Pahlavi monarchy. Its main goal is to analyze the fundamental contradiction through which the regime's authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering, designed ostensibly to consolidate power, actually led to the systematic undermining and erosion of its own legitimacy.

Method: The study employs a qualitative approach based on descriptive-analytical methodology and historical institutionalism. The analysis uses Weberian concepts of legitimacy as a benchmark and applies the notion of strategic culture to interpret the monarchy's identity policies.

Result: The research reveals a structural and irresolvable tension between the two main pillars of the Pahlavi project. On one hand, authoritarian modernization, marked by the personalization of power and the emptying of modern institutions of democratic substance, prevented the emergence of rational-legal legitimacy. On the other hand, cultural engineering, driven by the promotion of a "Strategic Culture" rooted in neo-ancientism and militant secularism, eroded the traditional bases of legitimacy and deepened the alienation between state and society.

Conclusion: Ultimately, the Pahlavi regime collapsed into a vacuum of legitimacy due to these contradictory policies, becoming a brittle and vulnerable political structure. This crisis was not a random occurrence but the logical outcome of the intrinsic paradox within its state-building project, one that prioritized economic growth over participation and identity construction over consent, paving the way to its eventual downfall.

Cite this article: Zareei, A (2026). The Legitimacy Paradox in the Pahlavi State: An Analysis of the Consequences of Authoritarian Modernization and Cultural Engineering, *Contemporary Researches on Islamic Revolution*, 8 (28), 59-76. <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcir.2026.399693.1726>



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Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcir.2026.399693.1726>

Introduction

The collapse of the Pahlavi regime in 1979 AD/ 1357 SH, one of the most extraordinary political ruptures of the twentieth century, raises a profound paradox: 'How did a government, celebrated abroad as an "Island of Stability" and lauded for its military might and oil wealth, unravel with such shocking rapidity?' This puzzle extends far beyond the narrative of a political downfall; it exposes the core of a deeper, structural crisis in Iran's modern state-building enterprise.

The origins of this crisis can be traced to the elite's response to the turmoil unleashed by the Constitutional Revolution. Amid pervasive anxiety over instability and disorder, many Iranian intellectuals came to embrace the idea that the nation's salvation lay not in the development of constitutional freedoms but in the imposition of a "Strong Government," even a "Reforming Dictator." The conviction that "A powerful government must come to power... a dictator or a strong government, whatever it may be" became deeply entrenched among the country's leading circles (Bahar, 1978 AD/ 1357 SH: 100). The Pahlavi state became the embodiment of this prevailing faith in "Authoritarian Modernization." From its inception, successive Pahlavi rulers launched a dual project to institutionalize centralized, stable authority: "Authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering."

The first pillar, authoritarian modernization, prioritized the creation of a modern army, a centralized bureaucracy, and new economic institutions (Abrahamian, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 169). Especially after the 1960s AD/ 340s SH, buoyed by soaring oil revenues, this order was transformed into a "Rentier State," (Mahdavy, 1970: 428-467) insulated from the demands and participation of society and its constituent classes (Skocpol, 1982 AD/1382 SH: 125; Haji Yousefi, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 137-13). Ostensibly, the regime's ambition was the construction of a Western-style modern Iran; yet this process was always riddled with contradiction. As numerous analysts have observed, the Pahlavi era was marked by a persistent tension between the quest for "Political Order" and the development of "Political Democracy." (Haji Naseri & Mohammadi Masiri, 2022 AD/1401 SH: 75-76) The relentless concentration of power, alongside the ascendancy of the Shah's personal interests over the "impersonal interests" of legal institutions, hollowed out these institutions, progressively undermined democratic stability, and ultimately foreclosed the emergence of rational-legal legitimacy (ibid.).

The second pillar was cultural engineering, an assertive campaign to forge a cohesive modern national identity grounded in archaic nationalism, secularism, and Westernism. This project, conceived to impose a particular "Strategic Culture," was deliberately set in opposition to the country's religious traditions and deep-rooted societal norms, aiming above all to undermine traditional bases of power, most notably the clerical establishment (Ghanizadeh et al., 2019 AD/1398 SH: 18). Serving not only ideological but also economic ends for the ruling elite, these policies reshaped patterns of consumption and fostered new monopolies. Yet, this top-down cultural project ultimately backfired: "It clashed with the historical and religious self-understanding of the majority, deepening the divide between state and nation and hastening the erosion of traditional legitimacy." (Souri Laki et al., 2002 AD/1394 SH: 723; Bashirieh, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 357; 2007 AD/1386 SH: 723)

Accordingly, the central argument of this article is that the Pahlavi regime's legitimacy crisis and eventual collapse were not contingent developments or simply the product of external opposition, but the logical outcome of an intrinsic internal paradox. By interrogating this relationship, the article addresses one core question: 'How did state projects of authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering, engineered to legitimize and reinforce power, paradoxically produce the systemic erosion of all forms of legitimacy (traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal) and precipitate the regime's downfall?' It further explores how each of these ventures, in turn, dismantled the foundations of rational-legal and traditional legitimacy, and how their intersection yielded a uniquely "Fragile Political Order."

The central contention, then, is that the Pahlavi state-building project was beset by a legitimacy crisis rooted in a fundamental structural contradiction: "On one hand, authoritarian modernization, development¹ without participation, foreclosed the emergence of rational-legal legitimacy; on the other, aggressive cultural engineering, identity-building without consent, subverted the foundations of traditional legitimacy. Together, these dynamics consigned the regime to a profound legitimacy vacuum, rendering it a "Fragile Political Order" whose collapse was the inexorable consequence of its own internal paradox.

The significance of this study lies in its development of an integrated analytical framework. Moving beyond one-dimensional interpretations that reduce the crisis to strictly political, economic, or cultural factors and this article demonstrates that the collapse of the Pahlavi regime was the outcome of the entanglement and conflict between processes of structural modernization and identity engineering. The study's core innovation is its focus on "Paradox," explaining the regime's downfall not as an accidental failure but as the logical result of fundamental contradictions embedded within the state-building project itself. By employing concepts such as "Fragile Political Order" and "Strategic Culture," this approach offers a deeper understanding of the regime's internal dynamics of failure and provides insights for comparative work on legitimacy crises in other modernizing states.

To unravel the central paradox of the Pahlavi state, this study adopts a methodology that bridges historical analysis and institutional theory. It employs a qualitative approach grounded in historical institutionalism, a framework that enables the analysis of path-dependent processes by tracing the evolution and internal contradictions of the state's institutions over time. To anchor this theoretical framework in historical evidence, the study utilizes a descriptive-analytical method, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. This combined approach makes it possible to demonstrate not only that the state's key projects failed, but also how they systematically and paradoxically undermined the very legitimacy they were intended to secure.

The article proceeds as follows: "The next section reviews the relevant literature and outlines the theoretical framework; the main analysis then examines the dual projects of authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering, tracing their paradoxical consequences; the final section concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing their broader implications for understanding legitimacy crises."

1. In this article, the term "Development" refers specifically to its economic and infrastructural dimensions, modernization, and, due to its separation from the political sphere, it is characterized by the qualifier "Without participation."

It should be noted that the focus of this study on analyzing the internal structures and fundamental contradictions of the Pahlavi regime in no way implies disregarding or underestimating the decisive role of political agency, most notably the struggles of the Iranian people and the unparalleled leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Rather, the analysis seeks to clarify how the "Fragile Political Order" generated by these paradoxes created a context in which revolutionary action by the people and leadership could successfully challenge and ultimately overthrow the entire political system. In other words, this study addresses the conditions that made the revolution possible.

1. Literature Review

The legitimacy crisis and the collapse of the Pahlavi state have long been central topics in Iranian history and political science. The existing scholarship can be broadly categorized into three main streams, each illuminating a distinct facet of this phenomenon. By building on and systematically synthesizing these approaches, the present study aims to offer a more integrated and innovative analysis.

The first, and most voluminous, stream of research, centers on the character of the Pahlavi state and its drive for "Authoritarian Modernization." Foundational works, such as Homa Katouziyan's theory of the "Arbitrary State," (Katouziyan, 1981) Ervand Abrahamian's analysis of the "Modern Absolutist State," (Abrahamian, 2005 AD/1384 SH) and John Foran's conception of the "Dependent Rentier State," (Foran, 1992) have shaped the field's principal framework. Collectively, these studies argue that the Pahlavi state, especially due to its heavy dependence on oil revenues, evolved into a political order increasingly autonomous from society, where modernization served not political development or public participation but the consolidation of the Shah's personal authority.

More recent research has refined this line of analysis through sharper theoretical lenses. For example, Haji Naseri and Mohammadi Masiri, drawing on the theory of "Conflict of Interest," contend that the Pahlavi order was animated by a fundamental paradox: "The tension between the Shah's "Personal Interests" and the "Impersonal interests of collective-rational political institutions." This contradiction not only stymied democratic institutionalization but propelled the state toward "Illegitimate Power" and produced a persistently "Fragile Political Stability." (Haji Naseri et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH)

The second stream addresses the Pahlavi state's project of "Cultural Engineering" and its ambitious bid to construct a new national identity. This approach, anchored in the triad of "Archaism, Westernism, and Secularism," sought to sever links with Islamic-Iranian traditions and reconfigure national identity around pre-Islamic and Western models. Drawing inspiration from the ideas of early intellectuals like Mirza Agha Khan Kermani,¹ such policies became a cohesive state program under the Pahlavis (Ashraf, 2005 AD/1384 SH).

1. Mirza Agha Khan Kermani was one of the most prominent representatives of this intellectual current. In his works (such as *Three Written and Hundred Sermon*), he explicitly attributed Iran's backwardness to the "Arab Invasion" and the "Influence of Islam," and saw the path to salvation in a return to the glory of ancient Iran and the imitation of Western civilization. (Kermani, 2000; n.d.)

Within this domain, Ghanizadeh and Mortazavian's research provides a fresh analytical perspective by introducing the concept of "Strategic Culture." They argue that the Pahlavi regime attempted to impose a "Strategic Culture" rooted in monarchical nationalism, Westernism, and secularism, a model that fundamentally clashed with the society's "Deep-rooted Culture" and was marked by internal contradictions (e.g., advocating modernity while reinforcing monarchical absolutism). As a result, this project not only failed to solidify legitimacy but also deepened the legitimacy dilemma and widened the state-society divide (Ghanizadeh and Mortazavian, 2019 AD/1398 SH). Additionally, Ghaderi et al. analyze this aspect from a political economy standpoint, showing how the regime's cultural policies enabled the emergence of "Identity-based Monopolies" and a "Modern form of fiefdom" for the elite (Ghaderi et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH: 153-194).

The third stream directly interrogates the "Crisis of Legitimacy" as the consequence of the intertwined processes described above. Seminal works such as Hossein Bashiriyeh's "Political Sociology" (Bashiriyeh, 2002 AD/1381 SH) and Ervand Abrahamian's "Iran between Two Revolutions" (Abrahamian, 2005 AD/1384 SH) vividly illustrate how the regime's authoritarian and cultural policies systematically alienated all social groups, from the clergy and traditional *bazaaris* to modern intellectuals, thereby paving the way for a broad-based revolutionary coalition.

More recent scholarship has sought to analyze this crisis through a structural lens. For instance, Shokraneh and Akhavan Kazemi argue that the regime's deficit of legitimacy across the three core dimensions of "Ideology, Structure, and Performance" left it in a state of paralysis, acutely vulnerable to revolutionary mass mobilization (Shokraneh, 2021 AD/1400 SH). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the regime's collapse was not a sudden or isolated episode, but rather the culmination of a protracted process of legitimacy erosion.

2. Research Gap and Innovation

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, most studies have tended to address one of these three dimensions in isolation: some have concentrated on the configuration of the rentier state, others on cultural policies, and yet others on the final outcome, namely, the legitimacy crisis itself. The principal gap in this literature is the absence of an integrated analytical framework capable of examining authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering not as discrete policies, but as fundamentally intertwined and mutually contradictory dimensions of a single state-building project.

This article's key contribution lies precisely at this intersection. By synthesizing insights from across these diverse streams, it argues that the Pahlavi legitimacy crisis was, at its core, the structural outcome of an internal paradox. Specifically, the study demonstrates how "Development without Participation" (the product of authoritarian modernization) and "Identity-building without Consent" (the product of cultural engineering) worked in tandem, systematically and simultaneously, to dismantle all three Weberian bases of legitimacy: "Traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. In sum, this research contends that the collapse of the Pahlavi state was not simply an accidental failure, but the inevitable outcome of fundamental contradictions

embedded within the very heart of its nation-building enterprise."

3. Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the "Paradox of legitimacy in the Pahlavi state" demands a composite theoretical framework capable of capturing the crisis's structural, cultural, and political dimensions in an integrated fashion. This framework rests on four conceptual pillars: the Weberian theory of legitimacy (serving as the benchmark for the crisis), the concept of the patrimonial-sultanistic state for elucidating the power structure, the theory of conflict of interest to illuminate the regime's internal mechanisms of collapse, and the notion of strategic culture to account for the identity-building project.

4. The Benchmark for Crisis: Max Weber's Types of Legitimacy

The foundation of this analysis is Max Weber's seminal theory of legitimacy, which posits three ideal types underpinning the rightful exercise of authority:

- Traditional Legitimacy: Derives from the sanctity of age-old traditions and hereditary status, exemplified by the institution of monarchy;
- Charismatic Legitimacy: Stems from the exceptional personal qualities, magnetism, or "Grace" of a leader;
- Rational-Legal Legitimacy: Is rooted in impersonal legal norms, codified procedures, and modern bureaucratic institutions (Weber, 1978: 215).

The Pahlavi state occupied a unique position, attempting to draw simultaneously from all three sources: "Performing as heir to Iran's monarchical tradition (traditional), projecting a charismatic and savior-like image of the Shah (charismatic), and establishing modern state and legal institutions (rational-legal). The core hypothesis of this article is that the regime's dual policies, authoritarian modernization and cultural engineering, paradoxically led to the simultaneous dissolution of all three bases of legitimacy."

5. The Structure of Power: The Patrimonial-Sultanistic State

To more precisely apprehend the nature of "Authoritarian Modernization," the Pahlavi state's structure is examined through the Weberian concept of "Sultanistic Patrimonialism." (ibid: 231)

Later developed by theorists such as Juan Linz to analyze contemporary regimes, this model refers to a state in which the boundaries between public and private spheres are obliterated, and the country is governed as the ruler's personal domain (Chehabi et al., 1998: 12-13). In such a system, personal loyalty to the ruler supersedes legal-rational competence, and modern institutions, such as the bureaucracy and military, are not deployed to empower society, but are transformed into instruments for consolidating the "Sultan's" personal power and for managing the elite. The absolute concentration of authority in the person of the Shah, together with the de facto subordination of officials to "Royal Orders," epitomizes this mode of governance in Pahlavi-era Iran (Katouziyan, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 418-31). This model explains why, despite their outward trappings, modern institutions in Iran failed to serve as foundations for rational-legal legitimacy.

6. The Mechanism of Crisis: Conflict of Interest and the Fragile Political Order

At the analytical core of this article's account of paradox lies the concept of "Conflict of Interest," adapted from the political philosopher Thomas Nagel. Nagel distinguishes between the "Personal Viewpoint" (individual interests, desires, and loyalties) and the "Impersonal Viewpoint" (the obligations of rational institutions, laws, and the public good) (Nagel, 1995). Scholars of Iranian politics have applied this framework to the Pahlavi state, revealing a structural tension between the "Shah's Personal Interests" and the "Impersonal interests of rational-legal institutions." The systematic predominance of the personal over the impersonal produced two devastating consequences: first, the consolidation of an "Illegitimate Power," in which decisions were dictated by individual will rather than the common good; and second, the creation of a "Fragile Political Order" that appeared stable on the surface but was deeply vulnerable at its core (Haji Naseri, 2022 AD/1401 SH: 82). This theory sheds light on the precise internal mechanism through which rational-legal legitimacy was ultimately eroded.

7. Cultural Dimensions: The Failure of Strategic Culture

To analyze the project of "Cultural Engineering," this study draws upon the concept of "Strategic Culture," rooted in the literature on security studies.¹ Strategic culture refers to the constellation of beliefs, symbols, and norms that ruling elites actively cultivate to legitimize their authority and shape national identity. The Pahlavi state's strategic culture was anchored in three pillars: "Archaistic Nationalism," "Westernism," and "State Secularism." This cultural project served as the regime's primary instrument for breaking with the past and crafting a new collective identity. However, this official strategic culture fundamentally clashed with the "Deep-rooted" Islamic-Iranian culture of the broader populace. Its authoritarian and anti-traditional character not only failed to supplant the established cultural order, but also undermined the regime's own claims to "Traditional Legitimacy," fueling widespread alienation and deepening the legitimacy crisis (Ghanizadeh, 2019 AD/1398 SH: 12–20).

In sum, this integrated theoretical framework demonstrates how authoritarian modernization (as conceptualized through patrimonialism and conflict of interest) eroded rational-legal legitimacy, while, simultaneously, cultural engineering (understood via the lens of strategic culture) dismantled traditional legitimacy, leaving the regime trapped in a comprehensive legitimacy vacuum.

8. Research Findings and Analysis

This section employs the preceding theoretical framework to examine the Pahlavi state's two principal undertakings: "Authoritarian Modernization" and "Cultural Engineering." The central argument advanced here is that, while these initiatives were ostensibly designed to strengthen and legitimize the state, they instead operated in a fundamentally paradoxical manner, simultaneously

1. Snyder was the first to seriously introduce the concept of strategic culture into the literature of international relations and security. He argued that the strategies and strategic attitudes of powers cannot be analyzed solely according to military logic and technology, but have deep cultural and historical roots. His research played a major role in the development of strategic studies after the Cold War and even today, founding the culture-centric approach in the analysis of international security. See Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1977).

eroding all three Weberian bases of legitimacy (traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal) and propelling the regime's legitimacy crisis to a point of irreversibility.

8.1. Authoritarian Modernization and the Destruction of Rational-Legal Legitimacy: "Development without Participation"

At the heart of the Pahlavi state-building project, particularly after the 1953 coup d'état, stood the project of "Authoritarian Modernization," which, on the surface, aimed to establish a modern, efficient state modeled after Western prototypes. By constructing modern institutions, a new military, an expansive bureaucracy, a revamped judicial system, and a national parliament, the regime projected the outward appearance of a rational-legal order (Abrahamian, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 215-20). In Weberian terms, such institutions should have constituted the primary wellspring of rational-legal legitimacy: the rightful exercise of power rooted not in veneration for tradition or personal charisma, but in the "Rule of impersonal laws and predictable procedures." (Weber, *ibid*: 215-20)

Yet, a closer analysis exposes a fundamental paradox at the core of this project. Pahlavi modernization did not unfold in a democratic context but rather within the architecture of a patrimonial-sultanistic state. In this system, the driving logic was not the empowerment of society or the institutionalization of law, but the consolidation and concentration of authority in the person of the Shah (Adibi, 1979 AD/1358 SH: 30-38; Katouziyan, 1979: 30-38).

As a result, modern institutions, far from fostering autonomy or the rule of law, were reduced to mere instruments for enacting the ruler's personal will and maintaining societal control. This process aptly characterized as "Development without participation," systematically hollowed out and discredited the foundations of rational-legal legitimacy through the following mechanisms.

8.2. Absolute Concentration of Power and the Hollowing Out of Political Institutions

The essence of a rational-legal system lies in the existence of independent political institutions, especially a legislature, capable of checking executive power and representing the interests of society. In the late Pahlavi era, these institutions persisted in form but were effectively stripped of substantive authority. The National Assembly and Senate, which under the constitution of the Constitutional Revolution were meant to embody the nation and serve as the locus of legislation, were reduced to ceremonial bodies. The electoral process, particularly after 1953, was entirely stage-managed: lists of approved candidates were finalized by the Shah and SAVAK prior to the polls (Abrahamian, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 207-321; Keddie, 1990 AD/1369 SH: 182 and 269).

This scenario exemplifies the structural conflict of interest identified in the theoretical framework: "An institution founded on an "Impersonal Viewpoint" (representing public interests and enacting general laws) was recast as an instrument of the Shah's "Personal Viewpoint," a rubber stamp for royal policy and a conduit for dispensing privileges to loyalists. In this environment, both opponents and modern technocrats concluded that legal pathways to participation were foreclosed, and that advancement could only be secured through proximity to the Shah's personal court." (Azimi, 2008: 277-80)

The culmination of this self-destructive trajectory, and the decisive moment when the regime

abandoned even the semblance of pluralism, was the decree establishing the "Rastakhiz (Resurgence) Party of the Iranian Nation" in March 1975. This was not simply an administrative directive to dissolve political parties; it constituted a profound statement on the very nature of power and a radical redefinition of the relationship between state and citizen (Milani, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 374; Shahedi, 2003 AD/1382 SH). At the apparent height of his power, buoyed by soaring oil revenues, the Shah refused even to tolerate loyal, state-created opposition parties such as Iran Novin and Mardom; with a single command, he summarily dissolved them all (Madani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 298-300). In the logic of a patrimonial state, even wholly loyal intermediary institutions are seen as redundant and potentially subversive, power must flow directly from the person of the ruler to society, unmediated by institutional layers.

In his address proclaiming this mandate, the Shah, in unmistakably uncompromising terms, eliminated any room for dissent or even neutrality, prescribing citizenship through absolute party loyalty and dividing the nation accordingly:

"Every Iranian must belong to this party [Rastakhiz]... Anyone who does not enter this political organization and does not believe in the three principles I have stated has two paths: either he is an individual belonging to an illegal organization, meaning in our own terms, a Tudeh-ite. That is, again in our own terms and with proof: unpatriotic. His place is either in an Iranian prison, or if he wishes, tomorrow we will gladly place a passport in his hand, without an exit fee, and he can go wherever he pleases. Because he is not an Iranian, he has no homeland, and his actions are not legal, they are illegal, and the law has specified his punishment..." (Ettela'at newspaper, 3 March 1975 AD)

These remarks, uttered in the most explicit terms, substituted the ruler's "Personal Viewpoint" for the "Impersonal Viewpoint" enshrined in the constitution. From that moment onward, the standard for "Being Iranian" and displaying loyalty to the homeland was no longer adherence to the country's laws, but membership in, and allegiance to, a party established solely by the will of a single individual. This decree equated political opposition with treason and foreclosed the last remaining formal avenues for participation. Ultimately, this act sowed deeper disillusionment among loyalists than it did fear among opponents; it made abundantly clear to political elites and technocrats within the regime's own restricted order that their prospects depended not on the rule of law, but on the personal and immutable will of the Shah. Thus, rather than consolidating power, the Rastakhiz Party became the clearest emblem of the delegitimization of legal institutions and the profound fragility of the regime's political order (Abrahamiyan, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 549; Ansari, 2001: 18).

8.3. Rentier Bureaucracy, Personal Loyalty, and the Weakening of Efficacy

The second pillar of a modern state, its bureaucracy, likewise succumbed to the same logic. Vast oil revenues transformed the Pahlavi state into a "Rentier State," freeing it from reliance on citizen consent or taxation and thus relieving it of any genuine sense of accountability (Katouziyan, 1982: 270; Skocpol, 1982: 270). This financial autonomy enabled the Shah to structure the bureaucracy not according to the principle of meritocracy, essential for rational-legal legitimacy, but on the foundation of personal loyalty.

Marvin Zonis, in his psychological analysis of Iran's political elite, demonstrates how the Shah deliberately prevented the emergence of independent power centers within the bureaucracy by fostering "Balanced Conflict" and mutual distrust among his officials (Zonis, 2021). In such an environment, sycophancy and proximity to the ruler supplanted expertise and competence. The result was the creation of a vast, yet inefficient and corrupt, bureaucratic apparatus that, far from serving citizens, primarily operated to safeguard the "Sultan's Authority." (Chehabi, 2001: 48-57) This pervasive inefficiency further undermined another critical dimension of legitimacy, namely "Functional Legitimacy,"¹ and reinforced the widespread perception that the state's massive administrative machinery served not national development, but the consolidation of a single individual's power (Saikal, 2009: 150-65).

Ultimately, the project of "Authoritarian Modernization," instead of yielding a stable and legitimate political order grounded in the rule of law, produced a "Fragile Political Order." (Sariolghalam, 2018 AD/1397 SH: 179; Haji Naseri, 2022 AD/1401 SH: 67-68) Though the regime maintained a modern and institutional façade, its internal substance was wholly dependent on the will of one man. By hollowing out institutions of genuine authority, the Pahlavi regime forfeited its most vital potential source of legitimacy, rational-legal legitimacy, and rendered itself profoundly vulnerable to crisis.

8.4. Cultural Engineering and the Identity Crisis: The Simultaneous Destruction of Traditional and Charismatic Legitimacy

If "Authoritarian Modernization" constituted the structural pillar of the Pahlavi project, "Cultural Engineering" served as its ideological counterpart. This initiative represented an ambitious bid to redefine Iran's national identity and to forge a "New Model of Man" whose loyalty would be reoriented away from deep-seated Islamic-Iranian traditions and directed squarely toward the Pahlavi monarchy. Within our theoretical framework, this undertaking is conceptualized as a deliberate "Strategic Culture," rooted in three pillars: archaistic nationalism, Westernism, and state secularism (Ghanizadeh and Mortazavian, 2019 AD/1398 SH: 14). Its ultimate aim was to construct a novel and enduring foundation of legitimacy for the regime.

Paradoxically, however, this project produced the very opposite of its intended result. The Pahlavi state's efforts at cultural engineering not only failed to generate a new source of legitimacy, but, by assailing the society's established normative and semantic structures (Azghandi, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 110-114; Moaddel, 2003 AD/1382 SH: 179), simultaneously and irreparably eroded the other two Weberian bases of legitimacy: traditional and charismatic.

8.5. Archaistic Nationalism: The Invention of Tradition against Living Tradition

The Pahlavi state recognized that the durability of its rule required a historical narrative and a claim to traditional legitimacy (Ashraf, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 212; AliAkbari, 2003 AD/1382 SH: 142). The very essence of traditional legitimacy lies in the "Sanctity of age-old traditions and the status of those who rule in accordance with them." (Weber, *ibid*: 226) Yet, unlike earlier

1. Functional or performance legitimacy refers to a government's right to rule based on its effectiveness and its successful delivery of public goods, economic development, and security.

dynasties such as the Safavids or Qajars, the Pahlavis lacked both an ancient lineage and a genuine tribal or religious base (Keddie, 1990 AD/1369 SH: 53). Confronted with this deficit, the monarchy opted not to engage with the society's actual, living traditions, rooted deeply in Shi'ism, but instead manufactured an "Invented Tradition." This construct hinged on a highly selective, theatrical, and ideological revival of Iran's ancient past, systematically marginalizing the Islamic period, an inseparable facet of the nation's cultural and historical identity, as if it were merely an obstacle to a restored ancient grandeur (Marashi, 2008: 85; Hoveyda, 1991 AD/1370 SH: 121; Tavakkoli, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 78-85).

This artificial approach culminated in two highly symbolic actions:

- 1) The 2500-Year Celebration of the Persian Empire (1971): Orchestrated with lavish displays and attended by foreign dignitaries at Persepolis, this celebration sought to draw a direct line between Mohammad Reza Shah and Cyrus the Great, establishing the Shah as the rightful heir to a 2,500-year-old imperial legacy. The spectacle, in which ordinary Iranians were mere passive observers, transmitted a dual and damaging message: By erasing fourteen centuries of Islamic history, it alienated the cultural identity of the majority, and by its conspicuous luxury and extravagance, it starkly highlighted the gap between the ruling elite and society's persistent poverty and hardship (Avery, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 100). Rather than generating traditional legitimacy, the event painted the regime as an "Alien" and "Westernized" entity, profoundly disconnected from the true culture of its people (Madani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 2, 166-73; Foran, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 469-470).
- 2) Changing the Official Calendar (1976): If the Persepolis celebrations embodied ideological theater, the abrupt switch from the Solar Hijri calendar to the Imperial calendar marked a direct assault on everyday life and the temporal rhythms of society. By replacing the Islamic calendar, rooted in the Prophet's migration, with a chronology based on Cyrus's coronation, the state severed its last symbolic ties to Iran's Islamic identity. This unnecessary act, motivated purely by ideological zeal, provoked fierce opposition among the clergy and was interpreted, even by modern and secular segments, as further evidence of the Shah's autocracy and detachment from social reality (Madani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 309-10).

In the final reckoning, the policy of "Archaistic Nationalism" failed decisively. Its invented tradition collided headlong with the society's living traditions, rooted in centuries of Islamic heritage. Instead of generating traditional legitimacy, this approach eradicated its last vestiges and recast the Shah as an adversary of the people's culture and historical identity (Bigdeli, 2022 AD/1401 SH: 126).

8.6. Artificial Charisma and Sultanic Isolation: A Disconnected Aura

Parallel to its pursuit of traditional legitimacy, the regime invested considerable resources into constructing charismatic legitimacy. Charisma, by definition, springs from the "Exceptional grace and allure of an individual" and relies on a direct, emotional bond between leader and followers (Weber, *ibid*, 241). Employing a full arsenal of modern propaganda, the Pahlavi state sought to shape Mohammad Reza Shah into a charismatic icon, a benevolent "Father of the Nation," a savior-like figure, the Aryamehr (Light of the Aryans), divinely protected (Milani, *ibid*: 39;

Pahlavi, 1970 AD/1349 SH: 68, 436-52; Pahlavi, 2019 AD/1398 SH: 301-305). Yet this "Artificial Charisma," engineered from above, was structurally doomed to failure for three fundamental reasons:

- 1) **Sultanic Isolation and Lack of Real Connection:** Especially after the 1953 coup, the Shah withdrew ever further into a cocoon of fear, suspicion, and the flattery of his inner circle. This "Sultanic Isolation," emblematic of the patrimonial state, foreclosed any possibility of genuine, emotional engagement with the masses (Zonis, 1991 AD/1370 SH: 189; Milani, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 462). The Shah, insulated and distant, addressed the nation through the screen, always separated by bulletproof glass, never truly among his people. This profound physical and emotional remove precluded the formation of the authentic relationship that is essential to charismatic legitimacy (Ansari, *ibid*: 159, 170; Hoveyda, 1991 AD/1370 SH: 159, 170).
- 2) **Megalomania and Belief in a Supranational Mission:** The regime's construction of charisma was further undermined by the Shah's deep personal conviction in a divinely ordained mission. In *Mission for My Country*, he overtly recounts mystical experiences and what he calls the "Support of a hidden force," writing:

"In any case, from the age of six or seven, I have held the continuous belief and faith that the great God has always kept me and will continue to keep me under His protection. Faith in this matter has brought me a special peace of mind and reassurance, and for this reason, when I sometimes measure my own will against the will of the Almighty, I become greatly concerned and wonder whether my will is predetermined or free. And if the eternal will and divine force are for my preservation and protection, then this will must be based on a cause and a purpose. Perhaps such beliefs are not very agreeable to those who consider themselves worldly or opinionated, but in my view, the great God has been my protector and helper in dangers and calamities." (Pahlavi, 1970 AD/1349 SH: 68)

This self-perception gradually devolved into a form of megalomania that left the Shah divorced from social and political realities. Asadollah Alam notes in his diary entry of February 16, 1971, His Majesty's telling declaration:

"I have tested it; whoever has confronted me has been eliminated; whether domestic or foreign; for example, the Kennedy brothers in America, Nasser the President of Egypt, Khrushchev the Premier of the Soviet Union. Domestically, too, whoever has confronted the Shah has been overthrown, like Mossadegh and to some extent Ghavam Saltaneh. Razmara. Mansur, too... was extraordinarily ambitious, he too was killed... Look how everything suddenly worked out. We solved the oil issue. Heavy rain fell. And in the world, the issue of Iran's leadership over a large Middle Eastern region was proven." (Alam, *ibid*: 1349-1351; Alikhani, 2011: 207)

This conviction in his own immunity and chosenness, though foundational to his self-understanding and sense of legitimacy (Fallaci, 1978 AD/1357 SH), in practice rendered him impervious to criticism or dissent, intensifying the distance and alienation that defined his rule.

- 3) **The Rise of a Rival and Authentic Charisma:** Political reality abhors a vacuum. In the space left by the failure of the Shah's artificial charisma, a genuinely powerful and culturally anchored charisma was rising: that of Imam Khomeini. Unlike the Shah,

Khomeini embodied simplicity and austerity, spoke the people's language using deeply resonant religious idioms, and cast himself as the defender of "Islam and Iran" against "Tyranny," "Corruption," and "Foreign Colonialism." (Khosropanah, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 720-50) Whereas the Shah's charisma was constructed on luxury, aloofness, and foreign backing, Imam Khomeini's was grounded in spirituality, asceticism, and a call for independence. This revolutionary charisma not only filled the prevailing void but decisively recast the Shah from a putative charismatic leader to a "Corrupt and dependent dictator," shattering the last remnants of his legitimacy (Akhavan, 2019: 61-68).

In sum, the cultural engineering project, intended to fortify the foundations of the regime by manufacturing charismatic leadership, instead prepared the ground for the rise and triumph of a rival, authentic charisma. By projecting an unrealistic, isolated image of the Shah, the regime pushed the legitimacy crisis to a decisive point of no return.

8.7. Consequences of the Legitimacy Crisis: The State in a Vacuum and the Collapse of Fragile Political Order

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated how the twin policies of "Authoritarian Modernization" and "Cultural Engineering" converged to systematically erode all three Weberian foundations of legitimacy, rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. This led to a profound and pervasive legitimacy vacuum. Outwardly, the Pahlavi regime projected unprecedented strength, anchored in its modern military, sprawling bureaucracy, and vast oil revenues; but internally, it suffered a deep crisis of meaning and complete disconnection from society.

At this stage, much of the literature dwells on the immediate accelerants of collapse, such as the economic crises of the 1970s (inflation and inequality) or external pressures like the Carter administration's human rights campaign. While these factors undeniably exacerbated the situation, the analytical framework advanced here contends that they were not root causes but rather sparks igniting the powder keg of a widespread legitimacy vacuum. The central question, then, is as follows: Why did such pressures culminate in a full-scale revolution in Iran, while similar shocks elsewhere did not? The answer lies in the nature of the Pahlavi system as a "Fragile Political Order," (Haji Naseri, *ibid*: 81-82) one so bereft of genuine legitimacy that it lacked any capacity to absorb or deflect such crises. The consequences of this legitimacy vacuum are especially clear in three key domains:

8.8. The Supremacy of the "Personal Viewpoint" over the "Impersonal Viewpoint" and the Production of Illegitimate Power

Within the Pahlavi patrimonial-sultanistic state, the equilibrium between the ruler's "Personal Viewpoint" and the law's "Impersonal Viewpoint" was radically upset in favor of the Shah. He regarded himself as the very embodiment of the state and conflated his personal interests with those of the nation. This outlook is powerfully encapsulated in a 1965 U.S. Department of State report:

"The Shah is not just the monarch; he has in practice made the job of Prime Minister his own. He is the commander of the army, and all important government decisions are subject to his opinion and approval. No important appointment in the state apparatus

is made without his approval. He directly runs the country's security apparatus. Foreign policy is in his hands. He selects and appoints ambassadors. Promotion in the army, above the rank of lieutenant, is directly in his hands and cannot be realized without his approval. Important economic decisions, from the details of foreign loans to the appropriate location for a new factory, are referred to him. The management of universities [and the appointment of their chancellors] is his responsibility. He determines the details of the fight against corruption. He chooses the representatives for the Majles and the Senate. The nature of opposition activity in the two houses and the bills that are passed are up to him." (Milani, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 510)

This overwhelming dominance of the "Personal Viewpoint" turned modern institutions into little more than passive instruments for enacting "Royal Orders." As a minister in Hoveyda's cabinet wryly observed, "When I saw that everything was fabricated, I had to laugh. Nobody said much. The ministers just sat there signing documents." (Graham: 1979 AD/1358 SH: 163) Thus, state power became "Illegitimate" in the truest sense of the term: exercised without the belief or consent of the governed (Haji Naseri, *ibid*: 62).

8.9. The Rentier State as an Accelerator of State-Nation Alienation

Rentier economics relieved the state of a fundamental necessity that underpinned the formation of modern states in the West, namely, the creation of a social contract based on "Taxation in exchange for accountability." This dynamic diverted the state-nation relationship in Iran from the classical state-building trajectory and deepened the profound alienation between the two (Katouziyan, *ibid*: 125 and 245). This new dynamic had two profound and destructive effects:

- 1) Erosion of the Social Contract: Rather than serving as the representative and servant of its citizens, the state became a dispenser of patronage, distributing resources, services, and development projects (such as those under the White Revolution) not as a "Duty" toward the people, but as "Gifts" and "Royal Favors" bestowed upon subjects. The relationship between state and society was thus transformed: what should have been a bond of "Rights and Responsibilities" devolved into a paternalistic "Father-Child" dynamic, intensifying mutual alienation and eroding any sense of partnership between rulers and ruled (*ibid*: 1987: 386-7).
- 2) Vulnerability of Functional Legitimacy: The regime's legitimacy strategy ultimately rested on its ability to raise living standards and provide material benefits. Yet this "Functional Legitimacy" was precariously brittle. When the economic crisis of the 1970s struck, Iran's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, exceeded 0.50 by 1977; rampant inflation and growing inequality quickly undermined this last, fragile foundation. As soon as material benefit could no longer be guaranteed, the regime's legitimacy evaporated. Economic grievances almost overnight escalated into a full-blown political crisis, because no alternative, deeper bases of legitimacy remained (Katouziyan, *ibid*: 332-4; Foran, *ibid*: 334-8; Pesaran, *ibid*: 504-8).

8.10. The Elimination of ‘Shock Absorbers’ and the Creation of a Deadly Political Vacuum

Arguably the gravest consequence of the Pahlavi autocratic structure was its systematic eradication of all independent institutions and elites capable of acting as "Shock Absorbers"¹ during periods of political crisis. In robust political systems, intermediary bodies, such as autonomous political parties, professional associations, a free press, and critical elites, serve as vital mechanisms for absorbing, channeling, and diffusing social discontent. By providing outlets for popular grievances and structured venues for criticism and negotiation, these institutions play a crucial role in transforming potential crises into manageable challenges, deterring escalation into existential threats.

These institutions, by channeling popular demands and providing space for dialogue and critique, prevent challenges from escalating into structural crises. The Pahlavi regime systematically dismantled these arenas one by one, and ultimately, with the establishment of the single Rastakhiz Party, suppressed every independent voice (Parsa Banab, 2004 AD/1383 SH: 1, 512, 643).

The outcome was the creation of an absolute political vacuum. Freed from any mediating forces, society became starkly polarized into two opposing and irreconcilable blocs: on one side, the Shah and a narrow circle of loyalists; on the other, a diverse but unified coalition of adversaries. This collapse of intermediary institutions stripped the system of all flexibility and resilience. Consequently, any shock or episode of discontent, no matter how minor, was transmitted immediately and unbuffered to the apex of the power pyramid, destabilizing the entire regime.

The absence of these shock absorbers proved fatal in 1978-79. Lacking mechanisms for containment or gradual reform, burgeoning social dissatisfaction could no longer be managed or channeled; instead, it rapidly escalated into a sweeping revolutionary movement intent on toppling the existing order. Thus, the Pahlavi "Political Order," while outwardly robust was in truth exceedingly "Fragile," having forfeited every base of legitimacy, it stood fully primed to collapse at the first encounter with genuine crisis.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the central question: how did the very strategies by ‘Which the Pahlavi regime sought to consolidate power and forge a modern, robust state come to undermine and ultimately destroy the foundations of its own legitimacy?’ The evidence presented here demonstrates that the regime’s legitimacy crisis and subsequent collapse were not abrupt failures or the products of sudden shocks; rather, they represented the culmination of a gradual, structural process by which all three Weberian forms of legitimacy, rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic, were systematically eroded by the regime’s own dual policies.

First, the destruction of rational-legal legitimacy through "Authoritarian Modernization."

Although the Pahlavi regime constructed the shell of modern institutions, these existed within the confines of a patrimonial-sultanistic order, hollowed out of any genuine rational-legal substance. The absolute centralization of power in the Shah’s person, the overwhelming

1. The concept of "Shock Absorbers" in a political system refers to intermediary institutions like independent parties, a free press, and civil society organizations that can absorb and manage social discontent, preventing it from directly destabilizing the core of the state.

dominance of his "Personal Viewpoint" over the "Impersonal" interests of law and nation, and the reduction of both elected and appointed institutions to mere extensions of royal will, collectively demolished the rational-legal foundations required for modern state legitimacy. Sustained by rentier oil revenues, this system rendered the state ever more insulated from society, severed the remaining bonds of accountability, and deepened the alienation between ruler and ruled.

Second, the simultaneous destruction of traditional and charismatic legitimacy through "Cultural Engineering."

In an attempt to fill the resultant vacuum of meaning, the regime pursued an aggressive strategy of "Cultural Engineering." By seeking to "Invent Tradition" through archaistic nationalism, the state's ideological project clashed headlong with the authentic, lived culture of Shi'i Iran, alienating its most powerful reservoir of traditional legitimacy. Simultaneously, the effort to manufacture an "Artificial Charisma" for the Shah via a vast apparatus of propaganda failed to generate an authentic emotional connection with the people; at the moment of crisis, this synthetic charisma rapidly collapsed, yielding ground to a rival, revolutionary charisma.

Third, the "Fragile Order": the ultimate consequence of pervasive illegitimacy.

In the end, the Pahlavi regime succeeded only in obliterating all its own sources of legitimacy. Bereft of commitment to law and accountable institutions, it lacked rational-legal legitimacy; by disregarding the people's deepest traditions, it forfeited traditional legitimacy; and with a leader isolated and unconvincing, it could not meaningfully lay claim to charismatic legitimacy. All that remained was the naked exercise of hard power, sustained by oil and coercion, a "Fragile Political Order" whose apparent strength belied its inner hollowness. Devoid of intermediary institutions or shock absorbers, the regime was unable to withstand the profound crisis of 1977–79: what seemed a sudden collapse was, in fact, the logical conclusion of years of self-inflicted erosion.

The fate of the Pahlavi regime stands as a stark historical reminder that enduring political power cannot subsist in a vacuum, propped up merely by material resources and coercion. Legitimacy is the essential connective tissue between rulers and the ruled, and any order built upon foundations alien to the deep cultural, social, and political structures of a nation is destined, sooner or later, for self-destruction. It is self-evident that this structural analysis of the "Conditions of Possibility" for collapse in no way seeks to negate the decisive role of historical actors, particularly the leadership of the Revolution and mass mobilization. Rather, it explains why and how revolutionary agency, operating within a context of legitimacy vacuum and structural fragility, was able to exert such profound effect and ultimately achieve victory.

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