**[The Iranian story](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831996/the-iranian-story)**

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A FEW days after the triumphant arrival of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran in February 1979, four Pakistani students were having a meal in a suburban restaurant when they were surrounded by Kalashnikov-bearing Iranian Revolutio­nary Guards, who were inexperienced and more nervous than the students. They were like this because the Shah’s ruthless regime had ensured that no one, other than state functionaries, possessed a weapon.

As one of the four students, I recalled the incident at the time of the visit of the Iranian president to Pakistan recently. I was studying in an institution set up by the Harvard Business School, on the request of the Shah, to give Iranians a modern business education in their own country.

The public was so happy when the Shah fled that shops selling sweets ran empty. People, delirious with joy, were out on the streets displaying currency notes with the Shah’s picture torn out. Young people were shouting “Shah raft” (the Shah’s left). APCs and tanks, looted from abandoned cantonments, were being driven on the streets of Tehran by euphoric teenagers.

The four of us, all raised in a Western-oriented, English-medium environment, were confused. We felt sympathy for the citizens of Iran, who had been taken over by the mullahs. We felt fortunate to be citizens of Pakistan, where despite all our democratic shenanigans (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was on trial but had not been hanged yet), we still had a tolerant government. There was nothing equivalent to Iran’s secret service Savak, which had its fleet of ‘Vigos’ to ‘fix’ and eliminate dissidents.

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Khomeini’s arrival heralded the curbing of civil liberties. For instance, women, many of whom were used to wearing tight jeans and short skirts in public, could now no longer leave their homes without hijab. Our sympathies were with our Western-oriented class fellows, most of whom had to flee the country. We felt Iran was in for the long grind at the hands of an inexperienced and dogmatic clergy.

Forty-five years later, after watching the Iranian armed forces take on the biggest bully in the region, Israel, and scaring it into backing off through guts, technology and a very well thought-out military manoeuvre, I am compelled to change my mind.

The Iranians have shown that they value their self-respect and beliefs more than their worldly comforts. They have not blinked in 45 years against the most dominant country in the world — the US — and its allies, despite having undergone isolation and economic deprivation, and the harassment of Iranian citizens.

Because of their grit and national pride, they have become a self-reliant and proud nation with their own, indigenous industry, both commercial and military. Their military prowess, despite facing sanctions, is creditable. A photo in the media showing their military high command sitting at the feet of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, when he congratulated them on the Israeli operation, felt unreal to a Pakistani.

Despite a domineering Islamic regime, the Iranians’ pride in their culture and history is supreme. The Iranian new year Nauroze, which is basically a Zoroastrian festival, is still the most important event in the Iranian calendar. The country closes down for three weeks to celebrate it. The celebration of two Eids is hardly notable in this context.

The Islamic government greatly respects citizens’ privacy (chador and chardiwari) and believes in the principle that what you do inside your home is your business. I asked an Iranian friend about this contradiction in the perceived harshness of the regime. He said that during the Shah’s time, “we used to drink publicly and pray privately; now we pray publicly and drink privately”.

People who have travelled to Iran recently talk about a clean and developed country, with good roads, an efficient and modern railway system and huge modern shopping malls. Their literacy level is 89 per cent compared to our 58pc; their expenditure on education is 23pc of the budget, while we spend 11.5pc; on health, they spend 23pc, while we spend 4.3pc. These figures indicate that they prioritise human development. True, Iran has it problems, including corruption, but it still ranks 24 on the Global Corruption Index, while we are at 133rd position.

It is depressing to compare ourselves with our other neighbours too. India and Bangladesh are way ahead of us, economically and in human development indices. Even Afghanistan seems to be better than us in the context of law and order. On the economic front, their currency is stronger and stabler than ours. Four Pakistan rupees is equal to one Afghani. The reasons for the continued decline of Pakistan are many, but the primary one for me is that the people who control power are not made accountable. While I felt proud as a Pakistani 45 years ago, I am not sure I do anymore.

*The writer is a former civil servant.*

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