

# IRAN'S "REVOLUTION OF VALUES": LIVING IN A THEOCRACY

By Rick Steves

As I settled into the plane flying us between two Iranian towns, the pilot announced, "In the name of God the compassionate and kind, we welcome you to this flight. Now fasten your seatbelts."

Whether on a plane, or simply walking the streets of any city here, it's clear that Iran is ruled by a theocracy. Even though it's technically a "democracy" with an elected president, the top priest—a man called the "Supreme Leader"—has the ultimate authority. His picture (not the president's) is everywhere.

The seeds of today's Iran were sowed during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The rebellion, with its spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrew the US-backed Shah and took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. As a gang of students captured the world's attention by insulting the US, this was a great event for the revolutionaries...and a wrenching one for Americans.

1. *What could be the issue with an elected president but also a top priest? How does that lead to instability?*

Seeing the Ayatollah Khomeini from the Iranian perspective was amazing: Rather than the impression I've long held—of a threatening leader—many Iranians consider Khomeini a lovable guide... approachable and a defender of traditional values. After the Shah's wastefulness and corruption, Khomeini's simplicity and holiness had a strong appeal to the masses. To the poor and the simple country folk, Khomeini was like a messiah. Khomeini gave millions of Iranians hope.

2. *Is the Iranians view of Ayatollah Khomeini a cult of personality? Or the fact that he changed the parts of Iran that citizens' hated the most?*

Iranians who support the Revolution call it a "Revolution of Values." Many conservative Iranians I met told me they want to raise their children without cheap sex, disrespectful clothing, drug abuse, and materialism—all things they associate with America, and all things that, they believe, erode character and threaten their traditional values. It worries them as parents. It seems to me they willingly trade democracy and political freedom for a society free of Western values (or, they'd say, "lack of values"). It's more important to them to have a place to raise their children that fits their faith and their valued idea of "family values."

Of course, there's plenty of drug addiction, materialism, and casual sex in Iran—but these evils are pretty well hidden, and are constantly being uncovered by the theocracy (government). In general, the Revolution seems to be well established. In terms of materialism, Iran and the US stand at opposite extremes. Back home, just about everywhere we look, we are flooded by advertising encouraging us to consume. Magazines have slick ads. Sports stars wear corporate logos. Our media are shaped and driven by marketing. But in Iran, Islam reigns.

Billboards TV programming, and young people's education all proclaim the teachings of great Islamic holy men...at the expense of the economy.

3. *Why does Iran hate America and our culture? What do you think of our values?*

4. *Why does Rick Steves state that the “Revolution is well-established?” What does Iran preach instead of the materialism of the world?*

And yet, I am surprised by the general mellowness of the atmosphere in Iran compared to other Muslim countries. Except for the strict women's dress codes and the lack of American products and businesses (because of the US embargo), life on the streets here is much the same as in secular (non-religious) cities elsewhere. Ironically, despite the aggressively theocratic society, the country actually feels *less* spiritual than neighboring, secular Muslim nations I've visited. In Turkey, it can be hard to walk down the sidewalk during prayer times because mosques are overflowing with people. In Iran, I barely heard a call to prayer.

5. *How does Iran compare to other Muslim nations? What are the bad parts to Iranian society?*

While the focus of my trip is on the people rather than the politics, Iran's theocracy makes civil rights concerns unavoidable. Civil liberties for women, religious minorities, and critics of the government are the mark of any modern, free, democracy. I believe that, given time and a chance to evolve on their cultural terms, the will of any people ultimately prevails. But in Iran, that time is not yet here. For now, this country is not free. (And no one here claims it is—locals like to say, "Iranian democracy: You are given lots of options...and then our government makes your choice for you.")

6. *Why is this Iranian democracy different from a true American democracy that preaches freedom? After reading this article – should we try to establish relations with Iran? Why or why not?*

## CHOICES FOR IRAN

As you listen to each group present about their option about what to turn Iran into, write down the strengths and weaknesses of that option. You will then be expected to choose one option and defend it.

OPTIONS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	QUESTIONS I STILL HAVE
1 – Develop a Social Democracy			
2 – Build a Socialist Future			
3 – The Guardianship of the Jurist			

*Which option do you believe is the right choice for Iran? Explain your decision based on your opinion and what seemed as the best option for Iran not what you know happened to Iran (with Ayatollah Khomeini taking over)*