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LAND REFORM IN IRAN

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AFTER several years of sporadic rumours about the adoption of an agrarian reform in Iran the announcement of its almost complete implementation, together with the announcement of other radical reforms which when realized will revolutionize the structure of political and economic life in that country, came as a great surprise, few people having imagined that such reforms could be effected in so short a time and in so drastic a manner.

Taking into account the peculiarities of land-tenure in Iran, this is probably the most radical land reform to be applied in any country of the Middle East. Moreover, it has a completely original basis.

Having lived in Iran since 1933 on a small farm surrounded by villages belonging in part to landowners or the State and in part to the peasants themselves I have had occasion to acquaint myself with the conditions of landownership there and with the reactions of the peasants in face of the land reform begun eighteen months ago, although having no sharecroppers on my farm I am not personally affected by this law.

The land unit in Iran is the village, of which there are some 58,000. There are also wide tracts of uncultivated and uninhabited land which belong in principle to the State but which can be bought or rented or acquired by private individuals if they can find a means of cultivating them.

The villages with the land attached to them used to belong to the State represented by its rulers, but many of them were bestowed by the Shahs on their viziers or courtiers or chiefs of tribes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in this way a landed aristocracy came into being. Afterwards, through purchase, many estates passed into the hands of merchants, and even of well-to-do peasants who had acted as bailiffs to their landlords and became what was called in Russia "kulaks."

At this time—that is, just before the reform—estates composed of villages fell into four categories: (1) Crown estates or *kholeseh*; (2) pious-foundations estates or *Vakf*; (3) private estates belonging to landowners owning the whole village or a part of it, and (4) estates divided into plots owned directly by the peasants who cultivated them, each family having one or several plots of varying size.

Except in the Caspian provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran and Gorgan, where rainfall is plentiful and artificial irrigation not resorted to, most of the villages in Iran have a *qanat*, or water channel which conveys to the fields underground water tapped in the foothills of the numerous mountain chains that are covered by snow in winter. Some big villages may have two or more *qanats*, or one *qanat* will serve two small villages. In certain regions where *qanats* do not exist and there is enough rainfall, cultivation is effected without artificial irrigation.



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With the exception of the small-holding owner-peasants, who own less than one-tenth of the land under cultivation in Iran, the peasants live on private estates belonging either to the landowners or the State or the pious foundations. In a few cases the peasants are the tenants, paying a fixed sum to their landlord yearly; but in most cases they worked on the land as share-croppers according to systems varying from district to district. A common system prevailing around Tehran before the land reform was the following: the landowner owned the land, whilst four other components entered the cultivation-plan—namely, water (in the case of artificial irrigation, the *qanat* belonging to the landowner), seeds, animals and labour, the revenue being divided at harvest time between the peasant and the landowner according to the components provided by each. For instance, if in addition to his labour the peasant had given seeds and animals, the land and water being given by the landowner, he received three-fifths of the produce; whilst if cultivation was effected by means of rain water he received three-quarters or even four-fifths of the produce. If the landowner provided the seeds and animals as well as the land and water the peasant should theoretically have received a share amounting to one-fifth, but in practice he was never given a share of less than one-quarter of the whole.

In the villages belonging to the landowners the peasants lived in houses built either by the landowner or themselves, and they worked on plots assigned to them by the owners. These plots could be changed, but usually the peasant families cultivated the same plot for generations. The owner decided what should be sown, but if he wanted to cultivate cash-crops such as cotton, sugar beet, oil-bearing seeds, tobacco, tea, etc., the peasant had to agree. If trees were planted their produce was divided on a fifty-fifty basis, but the produce of gardens belonged entirely to the owner if he used hired labour, as did that of any land not cultivated by the share-croppers. When a village was sold the share-cropper was not affected, his position remaining the same with the new owner.

In some regions the peasants were under an obligation to manure their plots and clean them from stones, but in others the owner had to pay for this to be done. After harvest an owner could take his plot away from a peasant and turn him out of the village; a peasant, likewise, could if he wished leave his plot and his village and go elsewhere. If he had built his house himself he could, with the landlord's permission, sell it to someone in the village. Or he could remove and sell the materials used in its building, if he had bought them himself. During the last two decades the former eventuality practically never presented itself, and since 1952 village councils have existed in most villages, the headman of the village now being elected by the peasants instead of being appointed by the landowner.

Very often, landowners living in the towns used to let their estates to individual tenants or to agricultural societies, which then received the owner's share of the produce, paying a fixed sum to him as rent. More frequently, the estates were administered by bailiffs on behalf of absentee landlords. In recent years, however, there have been more and more landowners, especially among those who have studied in agricultural colleges in Iran or abroad, who have interested themselves in their estates and

worked on them themselves, trying to introduce modern methods of agriculture, partly with share-croppers and partly with hired labour.

There were also a certain number of mixed estates, part State- and part privately-owned, or part landowner- and part peasant-owned, sometimes with the peasant-owner working on his private plot and also as a share-cropper on that of a landowner. Or, for instance, a father and elder son would cultivate their private plot, a second son would share-crop on the landowner's plot near by, and a third son work as a hired labourer either in his own village or elsewhere. Because of differences in climate resulting from varying altitudes it is possible for peasants to finish their harvesting in one village and then go to a colder region to help harvest later-ripening crops, or vice versa. Villagers who were unable to find a plot to work on, or had no inclination to do so, found occupation as artisans, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, millers, pedlars, shepherds or cowherds, living with their families in houses belonging to the landowners but having to pay rent for the shops where they exercised their trades.

The share-cropping system cannot be called serfdom, nor the share-croppers serfs, but until ten or twelve years ago the peasants in some regions were expected by custom to work a certain number of hours every year or every month on the landowner's estate without pay, building or repairing roads, bridges, *qanats*, ditches, the village public bath, mosque or school, the wall around the owner's garden, etc. In some places it was the custom when a peasant was marrying his son or daughter for him to bring the landowner a gift of chickens and eggs, the landowner usually making a marriage gift in return. Also, when a landowner normally resident in the town visited his estate, the more well-to-do peasants were expected to welcome him with eggs and chickens. These practices have been discontinued by order of the Government.

It is certainly true that politically the villagers were under the influence of their landlord, and few of them would think of voting against his wishes any more than happens in a patriarchal family, where the members more often than not vote according to the wishes of the *pater familias*. Naturally, therefore, since 75 per cent. of Iran's population belong to the rural areas, most of the deputies elected were landowners or their representatives, even if they presented themselves under a different political label, and this is the reason why in spite of the earnest desire of the Shah and his Government no Majles would pass a bill for land reform.

It will perhaps be asked: why is land reform in Iran considered indispensable, and how is it expected to improve the lot of the peasant and increase agricultural production?

The answer is concerned chiefly with psychological factors. The Iranian peasant, like most peasants all over the world, is traditionalist in outlook, conservative in his methods and obstinately suspicious of innovations. He is also accustomed to doing only the routine work he has done for generations, and he continues to use the same tools as those he used before the advent of Islam.

Although the peasants worked on the same plots of land from year to year they knew that this land did not belong to them and that they could be turned out at any time; consequently they were not interested in im-

proving it. More often than not the landowner lived in the town and visited his estate only at harvest time, to take his share of the produce. His bailiff, being usually of peasant stock himself, was just as unaware as the other peasants of any possibility of improvements which would increase production. Sometimes he cheated his master, and the peasants tried to cheat him. He used also to act as moneylender to peasants who had to borrow money to buy seed because they had spent the harvest-money on a marriage ceremony, or a pilgrimage to Mashhad or to Karbala, or to pay for doctors and medicines (usually quack doctors and village healers), or perhaps there had been a drought or a flood or locusts or some other pest to cope with—and the bailiff's terms were always harsh. For these reasons the peasants are mostly poor, and living as they do on land belonging to other people they lack a feeling of security. This has a depressing effect on their morale, making them servile, fatalistic and devoid of initiative.

By becoming owners of the plots they cultivate they will have to rely on themselves and they will know that their efforts will benefit themselves directly, for they will not have to share the results of their labour with anybody else. The sum they will have to pay annually to the Government over a twenty-five-year period as purchase price will be less than the amount they were paying to the landlord. They will look on their former masters as on equals, and their self-respect will increase accordingly. They will group themselves into co-operative societies (1,300 have been formed already) consisting of cultivators from several villages and also an expert from the Ministry of Agriculture, who will advise them on how to improve their methods. With capital lent them by the Agricultural Bank they will acquire better quality seed, and modern tools will be put at their disposal in accordance with a programme drawn up by the Co-operative itself. When they are in need of money the Bank will lend it to them at a low rate of interest against the Co-operative's guarantee. Above all, they will become truly free citizens of a progressive nation, instead of being exploited toilers in a backward one.

These were the considerations which influenced the Shah, who from the beginning of his reign was devoted to the ideal of the regeneration of his country and the advancement of the working classes, to push through land reform. It was in order to provide an example, and to try out its working on a smaller scale, that he began in 1951 to distribute his own estates, inherited from his father, among the share-croppers who were cultivating them. The peasants had to pay the value of their plots, calculated at a low price, in twenty-five yearly instalments. This money constituted the capital of a special bank (Bank 'Umrān, or Rehabilitation Bank) which was to help the peasants by lending them money at a very low rate of interest and financing the construction of rural roads, bridges, schools, dispensaries, public baths, mosques and sports facilities. In each case the Shah himself distributed the deeds of the properties, and the distribution of all the estates remaining to him will be completed in the present year.

The experiment was highly successful. Co-operatives were organized, the peasants were showing initiative in the adoption of newer methods of cultivation and the Shah was planning to put his land-reform projects into operation when the coming to power of Dr. Mosaddeq in 1951 plunged

Iran into a period of internal and external struggle and interrupted the natural progress of the country. When Dr. Mosaddeq, supported by the Tudeh (Communist) Party, openly defied the Sovereign the traditionally monarchist Iranian people rose against him, and after his removal the Shah could again pursue his plans of reform. He induced the Government to present to the Majles a land-reform project according to which all estates of more than a specified size would be divided among the local landless share-croppers against payment over a given period. For the reasons already mentioned (that the majority of the deputies were either landowners or subject to their influence) the project was referred to successive Commissions, and in spite of the Shah's earnest recommendations it was never found possible to apply it. It had no better success in subsequently-elected Assemblies, and after the dissolution of the last of them in 1961 as a result of complaints of irregularities during the elections the Government decided, on the Shah's orders, to implement the land reform without waiting for the election of a new Assembly and to bring it to Parliament for ratification after it had been effected, since it was believed that, once free from the influence of the landowners, the peasants who comprise three-quarters of Iran's population would send to the Majles deputies who would support this law.

The carrying out of the reform was entrusted to Hasān Arsenjanī, a journalist and politician well known for his radical views and determination, and after a short study of the question it was decided to abandon the surface-limitation procedure and simply to transfer the ownership of a whole village, with its water supply and fields, from the landowner to the share-croppers cultivating it. In this way the share-croppers would receive in full ownership the plots they had been cultivating on behalf of their landlord. Private houses inhabited by landowners, and the gardens attached to them, remained in their possession, as did land cultivated by hired labour. At first, each landowner was to keep one village of his own choice, but at a later stage (December, 1962) it was decided to divide the remaining villages also. Thus the old landowning system was almost entirely suppressed, all villages being divided among the share-croppers. Although areas cultivated by hired labour remained to their owners, the surface of such land would be subject to limitation according to climatic conditions, artificially-irrigated estates being smaller than those watered by rainfall and the steppelands.

The realization of this land-reform began in the province of Azarbaijan, near the U.S.S.R. frontier, and proved quite successful. During 1962 it was implemented in most of the provinces, in North, South, West, East and Central Iran. Observing the ineluctability of its application the big landowners one after another put their estates at the disposal of the Government for distribution. Open opposition was extremely rare, only a few landowners being arrested for trying to hamper the work of the government agents in charge of the operations. The murder of one of these agents, presumably by hired assassins, in the Fars province only hastened the process, the Shah himself distributing the deeds of the divided plots to the peasants as he had done in the case of his own estates.

This agrarian reform has received the unanimous approval of Iran's

rural population, and their gratitude was emphatically demonstrated to the Shah by the 4,000 peasant delegates of the 1,300 Co-operatives on January 9, 1963, the opening day of the Congress of Co-operatives, at which the Shah made a declaration announcing five other basic reforms: the sharing of profits by the workers in industrial enterprises; the nationalization of forests; revision of the electoral law; the eradication of illiteracy and the transformation of State-owned industries into share-holding companies.

On January 26 of this year a referendum was held on the subject of these reforms and was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the voters, more than 6,000,000 being in favour and less than 5,000 against.

Thus it is that by his courage and determination, in spite of obstacles and difficulties, the Shah has succeeded in opening up the way of democracy, freedom and progress to the ancient Iranian nation whilst at the same time maintaining their traditions and their national spirit.

