

Planning And Power In Iran: Ebtehaj And Economic Development Under The Shah

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Planning and Power in Iran: Ebtehaj and Economic Development under the Shah. By Frances Bostock and Geoffrey Jones. London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1989. xi + 238 pp. Illustrations, references, bibliography, and index. £22.50.

Reviewed by Rodney Wilson

Development efforts in Iran up to the time of the fall of the Shah are frequently regarded, with the benefit of hindsight, as a complete failure. Yet it is by no means clear that this was in fact the case. Even if failure is accepted, the causes need careful analysis, as the country had much in its favor, certainly in terms of resources. Frances Bostock and Geoffrey Jones believe sociocultural rather than economic factors were the main constraint on development. There were modernizers, of course, within Iran, notably Abol Hassan Ebtehaj, the planning minister for most of the 1950s. His efforts are what the book is essentially about, and the frustrations he faced illustrate just how difficult it is to change basic conditions in many Third World Muslim states.

Abol Hassan Ebtehaj was the first technocrat to come into a position of power in Iran. He was a nationalist who challenged the Western powers and strongly resented the influence of British institutions on his country. The privileged economic position of the British-owned Imperial Bank of Iran was a particular cause of concern. Yet Ebtehaj was far from being xenophobic, and in many ways shared more common values with the Westerners he resented than with the Muslim clerics of Iran. His personal dilemma was in many ways that of much of the Iranian intelligentsia and professional classes.

Interestingly, as Bostock and Jones emphasize, although the Shah himself was usually also depicted as a westernized figure, his style of rule was most certainly not. In many ways the Shah remained the Oriental despot, with pretensions to being a strong military leader, who surrounded himself with corrupt officials and was several stages removed from the realities of his country. It was perhaps inevitable that an honest technocrat should fall afoul of such a regime, with its conspiracies and intrigues, and end up as Ebtehaj, not merely dismissed, but also imprisoned.

Archive material was used from the British Public Record Office and U.S. sources released under the Freedom of Information Act. The most valuable material came from interviews with Abol Hassan Ebtehaj himself, and a professional oral historian, Christopher Cook, conducted the initial work in this respect. These interviews give the book a highly personal flavor and add to its readability. The study is a good example of what can be achieved through the use of oral history. It certainly contributes significantly to the understanding of the events that have shaped Iran's recent history. The book is sure to be of considerable interest to Middle Eastern specialists, as well as to development economists and economic historians.

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