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Crowning the “Sun of the Aryans”: Mohammad Reza Shah’s Coronation and Monarchical Spectacle in Pahlavi Iran

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Abstract

Coronations are commonly held at the beginning of a monarch’s reign, symbolizing accession to the throne and the continuation of the dynasty. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s coronation ceremony of 1967, however, was held twenty-six years into his rule and was designed to draw attention to the renewed glory of Iranian monarchy and the successes of the Pahlavi shahs. This coronation ceremony and related events offer important insights into the Pahlavi ideologues’ conceptualization of monarchy and the strategies they employed to inculcate their ideology in a domestic and global audience. The shah and the monarchy were presented as revolutionary and reformist, and simultaneously as the ultimate defenders of tradition; as religious by nature, but also as proponents of the separation of church and state. This paper seeks to understand, using a range of underutilized primary source material, how the regime delivered these apparently contradictory notions, and what it sought to gain from holding the event in the way that it did.

Keywords: coronation; Farah Pahlavi; Mohammad Reza Pahlavi; Pahlavi reign; political spectacle

On the morning of 26 October 1967, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s forty-eighth birthday, in a ceremony in the Museum Hall of Gulistan Palace in Tehran, the shah crowned himself and his queen. Every aspect of the event was designed to convey the idea that the shah was at once traditional and modern; the custodian of a 2,500-year-old tradition of monarchy, and a revolutionary. He was hailed by the Pahlavi ideologues as “one of the most brilliant people in the history of the contemporary world,” and was compared in the accompanying literature to Cyrus the Great.¹ By the time of the coronation, this had become standard rhetorical flourish, but one author went even further, arguing that “No king of Iran, not even Cyrus or Shah ‘Abbas, has done more to give the Iranians a sense of purpose and a stake in the future of their fatherland than Shahanshah Mohammad Reza.”² The monarchy as an institution and the monarch as its figurehead were presented as the true harbingers of Iranian glory. If Iran was to continue growing in wealth and power, it would have to rely, as it had in the past, on guidance from the throne.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had become shah in 1941, after his father, Reza Shah, had been forced to abdicate following the Anglo-Russian invasion. The twenty-one-year-old, however, found himself in a precarious position, with neither a strong political support base in Iran nor the confidence of the Allies; indeed, the British had even considered either re-instating the Qajar dynasty or supporting the accession to the throne of a lesser Pahlavi prince.³ The British finally accepted his succession precisely

¹Ardehsir Zahedi, “A Memoir of His Imperial Majesty Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shahanshah of Iran,” in *Bibliography of Iran*, ed. Geoffrey Handley-Taylor (London, Bibliography of Iran, 1967), xvii; *Jashn-i Tajguzari: Bih Rivayat-i Asnad-i Savak* (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasi-yi Asnad-i Tarikhi-yi Vizarat-i Ittila’at, 2006), 33.

²Ramesh Sanghvi and David Missen, *Shahanshah: A Pictorial Biography of His Imperial Majesty Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Aryamehr* (London: Transorient, 1969).

³Fakhreddin Azimi, *Iran: The Crisis of Democracy; From the Exile of Reza Shah to the Fall of Musaddiq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 37; Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 85–86.

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because he was considered a weak and innocuous figure.⁴ Having been deprived of the powers his father enjoyed, the new shah pledged to reign as a constitutional monarch, rather than rule as an absolute sovereign. In this turbulent political climate, in which the very future of the Pahlavi dynasty was in doubt, it was inconceivable that a coronation ceremony would take place. Therefore, the coronation, when it was finally held in 1967, although it had the symbols and accoutrements of a traditional ceremony, was an expression of the shah's coming of age, his rise to the pinnacle of political authority, rather than simply his ascension to the throne. It was as much an opportunity for political spectacle as it was observance of traditional rite.

Political spectacle is a powerful means used by those in power to communicate with their subjects, and it is often akin to theatrical performance, with each aspect choreographed to project an image or deliver a message.⁵ By using drama, political leaders are able, in the words of David E. Apter, to “transform incipient alternatives into preferred modes of action, using political theater to round up and collectivize individuals and groups by converting otherwise random or singular views into a more common understanding.”⁶ The political spectacle, which can be a somber occasion, such as a funeral, or a joyous occasion, such as a coronation or inauguration ceremony, gives life to a narrative. A strong message is important, but as in theater a good production also relies on capable performers, a skilled director, and a rousing setting. As Apter further observes, “the sound of language is as important as the meaning of its words.”⁷ Much of the scholarship on state nationalism under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi deals with texts authored by the shah, texts authored by ideologues in the service of the court, state-commissioned architecture, and cultural and educational policies implemented by the regime.⁸ This paper builds on this scholarship of nationalism in late Pahlavi Iran, and aims to show how the shah's regime also used political spectacles, specifically here the coronation, to articulate its nationalist discourse to a domestic and global audience.

Although most European monarchies had been abolished at the end of World Wars I and II, those that had survived, such as the British and the Dutch, had paid attention to spectacle as a way of rousing support for the institution. The funeral of George VI of England in 1952, for instance, had profound significance in shaping attitudes toward the monarchy, and in its solemn grandiosity it sought to incite strong national appreciation of a man who, as David Cannadine writes, “had not wished to be king, but had triumphed over war and a stammer by a strong sense of duty.”⁹ Even today the approval ratings of the Dutch and British monarchies lie around 65 percent.¹⁰ In fact, the highest approval ratings for the Dutch monarchy in recent years was in 2013, the year King Willem-Alexander was inaugurated, when 78 percent of the Dutch population expressed support for the monarchy. Such widespread support for

⁴Yann Richard, *Iran: A Social and Political History since the Qajars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 222.

⁵For discussion, see Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy,” in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29–90.

⁶David E. Apter, “Politics as Theatre: An Alternative View of the Rationalities of Power,” in Alexander et al., *Social Performance*, 225.

⁷*Ibid.*, 236.

⁸Texts authored by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi include: *Mission for My Country* (London: Hutchinson, 1961); *Inqilab-i Sifid* (Tehran: Kitabkhanih-yi Pahlavi, 1967); and *Bih Su-yi Tamaddun-i Buzurg* (Tehran: Kitabkhanih-yi Pahlavi, 1978). Texts authored by Pahlavi ideologues include: Manuchihir Hunarmand, *Pahlavism: Falsafih-yi Siyasi, Iqtisadi, Ijtima'i: Inqilab-i Shah va Mardum* (Tehran: Chapkhanih-yi Gilan, 1966). On Hunarmand's four-volume set, see Ali Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169–73; and Zhand Shakibi, “Pahlavism: The Ideologization of Monarchy in Iran,” *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 14, no. 1 (2013): 114–35. On state-commissioned architecture, see the works of Talinn Grigor, for example, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope, 2009); and “Kingship Hybridized, Kingship Homogenized: Revivalism under the Qajar and Pahlavi Dynasties,” in *Persian Kingship and Architecture: Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis*, ed. Sussan Babaie (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 219–54. On cultural and educational policies implemented by the regime, see, for example, Robert Steele, “The Pahlavi National Library Project: Education and Modernization in Late Pahlavi Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 25, no. 1–2 (2019): 85–110.

⁹David Cannadine, “Splendour out at Court,” in *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Sean Wilentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 230–31.

¹⁰See for instance, Nicola Wildash, “The Monarchy: Popular across Society and ‘Here to Stay,’” YouGov, 8 September 2015, <http://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2015/09/08/monarchy-here-stay>; and “Dutch Show More Support for Monarchy, More Trust in King,” NL Times.nl, 27 April 2017, <http://nltimes.nl/2017/04/27/dutch-show-support-monarchy-trust-king>.

the crown was what the shah wanted to replicate in Iran, and the organizers tried to encourage broad participation in the coronation festivities.

By the time of the coronation in 1967, the White Revolution had taken hold and attempts were made to codify a particular state ideology based on the glory of the monarchy and the veneration of Iran's ancient kings.¹¹ The shah adopted titles such as *Aryamihir* (Sun of the Aryans), linking him to an ancient tradition of kingship, and implemented modernizing reforms such as the redistribution of land and granting women increasing legal rights. In his imagined ideal Iranian society, which he termed the Great Civilization (*Tamaddun-i Buzurg*), the imperial family was presented as the archetypal Iranian family; a model for others to look to.¹² Queen Farah was the ideal woman in this Pahlavi utopia. She was beautiful and elegant, cared for her husband and children, and dutifully served her country. The crowning of his queen, therefore, was not only a striking example of the shah's use of ceremony to marry tradition with modernity, but it also was a way in which his family could be presented to the nation and the world as the quintessential modern Iranian family.

During the 1960s, opposition to several of the Pahlavi state's reforms, for example the White Revolution in 1963 and the Family Protection Act of 1967, came from the 'ulama'. As a result, the Pahlavi state sought with increasing urgency to curtail the influence of the 'ulama' through such means as controlling religious endowments and regulating the training of clerics, bringing religious education into the state bureaucracy.¹³ This policy constituted "an attempt to replace the existing Shi'a hierarchy with a new structure," as Michael Axworthy has written, "whose defining characteristic would be loyalty to the regime—a *din-e dowlat* (state religion)."¹⁴ The shah spoke in this period of his regime promoting the "true meaning of Islam," in contrast to the "demagogic and reactionary" abuse of its principles by some of the 'ulama'.¹⁵ In addition to the gradual emergence of a body of clerics trained by the state, a religious corps was established in 1971, which would help to spread this state religion all over the country. Only this "Pahlavist Islam," as Zhand Shakibi terms it, "could have a presence in the political arena, serving state interests."¹⁶ Although the coronation ceremony in 1967 was not an overtly religious event, religion did play a role. The extent to which this reflected the shah's attitude toward religion and the place of religion within his political ideology will be examined in this article.

Several authors have pointed to the European influence on the coronation ceremonies of the two Pahlavi shahs, or the absence of religious elements, to argue that they were essentially constituted of borrowed and invented practices. But although aspects of the ceremony could certainly be described in this way, much of the two Pahlavi coronation ceremonies represented a continuation of Qajar practice. For example, this Pahlavi rite was held in the Gulistan Palace, which stands in the center of Tehran as a visual testimony to the opulence of the Qajar monarchy and had been the site of court functions under the Qajars, including new year celebrations, receptions, and royal ceremonies.¹⁷ Clearly there was some legitimacy to be derived from continuing Qajar practice, but, equally, legitimacy was sought by replicating aspects of traditional European ceremonies. But which parts of the coronation ceremony of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi were Qajar or earlier Pahlavi tradition, and which parts were invented tradition, or borrowed from Europe? What do these Qajar and borrowed parts of the ceremony tell us about the Pahlavi regime's conceptualization of monarchy and the place of the Pahlavis in the annals of history? In exploring these questions, the article develops an understanding of how the Pahlavi regime used political spectacle to articulate the glories of monarchism in general, and Pahlavi monarchism in particular, in the late 1960s and 1970s.

¹¹Shakibi, "Pahlavism."

¹²Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 148–49.

¹³Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1980), 129–30.

¹⁴Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 91.

¹⁵Pahlavi, *Bih Su-yi Tamaddun-i Buzurg*, 338.

¹⁶Zhand Shakibi, *Pahlavi Iran and the Politics of Occidentalism: The Shah and the Rastakhiz Party* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 143.

¹⁷On Gulistan Palace in the Qajar period, see Jennifer M. Scarce, "The Architecture and Decoration of the Gulistan Palace: The Aims and Achievements of Fath 'Ali Shah (1797–1834) and Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–1896)," *Iranian Studies* 34, no.1 (2001): 103–16.

The Pahlavi Coronation

In the coronation program for George VI in 1937, the British poet and playwright John Drinkwater wrote that the coronation is “an act of the highest poetry in our national life.” He continued, “We know that in the figure of our Constitutional Monarch, and by no other means whatever, we can satisfy the desire in us for a symbol that shall stand above all creeds and parties in witness of the soul that still informs our manifold and material designs.” The monarch, then, is the embodiment of the nation, an “unimpeachable figure,” and a symbol of permanence, “whose inheritance is to be the accepted apotheosis of all his subjects.”¹⁸ The coronation ceremony, therefore, bestows legitimacy upon the ruler by articulating aspects of continuity, but it also can serve as a dramatic expression of change. For example, the coronation ceremony of Emir Faysal in August 1921, the first ruler of the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq who was installed by the British, closely resembled a European ceremony, but incorporated traditional Arab-Islamic elements.¹⁹

On 31 October 1925, the fifth Majlis voted to abolish the Qajar dynasty that had ruled Iran since 1789, and on 15 December the new shah, Reza Pahlavi, signed his oath of office to establish his new dynasty. Four months later, on 25 April 1926, the coronation ceremony of the new shah took place. Through this ceremony, Reza Shah sought to break with the Qajar past and create a distinctly Pahlavi, although recognizably Iranian, rite, as Abbas Amanat has written, to “reaffirm and in the process reinvent, the same monarchical tradition that the Pahlavi regime was replacing.”²⁰ The coronation took place at Gulistan Palace, according to Qajar tradition, stressing continuity, but the ceremony itself also articulated a romantic nationalist discourse that placed the Pahlavi monarchy within a broader and long-established Persian monarchical tradition. During the ceremony, seventeen pieces of regalia were brought into the reception hall (*tālār-i salām*) by members of the political and military elite, including the “world conquering” sword of Nadir Shah (*shamshīr-i jahāngushā-yi nādirī*), which was brought by minister of war ‘Abd Allah Khan Amir Tahmasbi; the bow of Nadir Shah (*kamān-i nādirī*); the sword and armor of Shah Isma‘il Safavi; and the sword of Shah ‘Abbas. Finally, two crowns were brought, the coronation crown of the Qajars (*tāj-i kiyān*) carried by Prime Minister Muhammad ‘Ali Furughi, and the Pahlavi crown (*tāj-i pahlavī*), carried by Court Minister ‘Abdulusayn Tiymurtash, which was specially made for the occasion.²¹

The bearers of these royal regalia (*hāmīlīn-i ašāsī-yi salṭanatī*) stood in two rows, forming a path to the Nadiri throne (*takht-i nādirī*) from the entrance of the hall, through which the shah walked, wearing a coronation cloak and a Pahlavi cap adorned with a paisley brooch (*jaqīh-yi nādirī*).²² During the ceremony, the bearers of royal regalia formed a semi-circle in front of the throne, in the middle of which, directly opposite the throne, stood Tiymurtash and Furughi, holding the two crowns. In this way throughout the ceremony the shah sat facing these relics of the past; reminders of the traditions he would have to uphold.²³ When Tiymurtash approached the throne, the shah removed his civilian cap to exchange it for the Pahlavi crown.²⁴

Just as Agha Muhammad Qajar had used a new crown, the *tāj-i kiyān*, for his coronation in 1796, rejecting Nadir Shah’s crown (*tāj-i nādirī*), Reza Pahlavi also chose to mark the emergence of his dynasty with the creation of a new crown.²⁵ This crown was based on that of “one of the greatest of Iranian monarchy, Shapur the Great” (r. 309–379 A.D.) and featured four sets of steps around its base.²⁶ In the middle

¹⁸John Drinkwater, “The King’s Majesty,” in *The Coronation of Their Imperial Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, May 12th 1937* (London: Odhams Press, 1937), 8.

¹⁹Elie Podeh, *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 110. For instance, the ceremony had all the trappings of a European ceremony, with a gun salute and singing of “God Save the King,” but it also was presented as an Islamic *bay‘a* (oath of allegiance) ceremony and, in accord with Islamic tradition, there was no crown.

²⁰Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 447.

²¹*Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran* (Tehran: Shura-yi Markazi-yi Jashn-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran, 1967), 81–82.

²²Ibid., 82; Iqbal Yaghma‘i, *Karnamih-yi Riza Shah-i Kabir: Bunyanguzar-i Iran-i Nuvin* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Vizarat-i Farhang va Hunar, 1976), 194.

²³*Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran*, 82.

²⁴Yaghma‘i, *Karnamih-yi Riza Shah-i Kabir*, 196.

²⁵On the *tāj-i kiyān*, see Abbas Amanat, “The Kayanid Crown and Qajar Reclaiming of Royal Authority,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1–4 (2001): 17–30.

²⁶“Crowns of Iran,” *Kayhan International*, 26 October 1967, 4.

of the front set of steps was a “golden sun with rays of diamonds” and a feather protruding from the top.²⁷ A total of 3,380 diamonds were used in the making of the crown, along with 5 large emeralds, 2 sapphires, and 368 pearls. The modeling of the crown on that of the Sasanian king Shapur reflected the new regime’s “fervor for the authentic and the romantic,” as Shahpur was not only a real historical figure but also a hero in the *Shahnameh*.²⁸ The fact that both the new Pahlavi crown and the old Qajar crown were present at the ceremony, and that the shah chose his new crown over the old, represented a physical and symbolic break with the immediate past (Fig. 1).

The historian Reza Ghods has written that Reza Pahlavi “plucked the crown from the hands of the high clergyman and placed it on his own head in an imitation of Napoleon.”²⁹ In fact, this act of self-crowning had historic precedence in Iran. For example, recording Fath ‘Ali Shah’s coronation ceremony in 1797, the Qajar chronicler ‘Abd al-Razzak ibn Najaf Kuli wrote, “then the mighty sovereign, dignified as Jamshid . . . conferred ornament on the jewel-embossed crown, by placing it on his head, elevated as the constellation Ursa.”³⁰ Reza Shah’s self-crowning was not, therefore, as also later would be said of his son, an attempt to imitate Napoleon, but emblemized the dynamics of power between the royal house and the traditional Islamic structures in the modern history of Iran. Who, after all, had the right to crown a Qajar or Pahlavi shah, but the sovereign himself?

The act of self-crowning notwithstanding, religion played an important role in the coronation of Reza Pahlavi. Before he put the crown on his head, a sermon was read by the Friday prayer leader of Tehran, symbolizing the new king’s acceptance both of the monarchy’s role as guarantor of religion and the importance of religious endorsement to his fledgling dynasty.³¹ Furthermore, in a speech from the throne, the new shah said,

My special goal will be focused on the preservation of religion and the strengthening of its foundations. Because I consider one of the most effective means of national unity and the strengthening of the spirit of Iranian society to be a full strengthening of the basis of religion.³²

One can certainly doubt the sincerity of Reza Shah’s words here. His biographer, Donald Wilber, wrote that they were “most appropriate and fitting, but they probably stemmed in equal parts from conviction and from the need for beginning his reign with the full support of the religious leaders of the country,” and Nikki Keddie further noted that the clergy were “temporarily reassured” by his “conciliatory attitude” at this time.³³ In spite of Reza Shah’s coronation promises, his reign was marked not by a strengthening of the foundations of religion, but a significant weakening of them, and his period brought, as Gheissari and Nasr have noted, “an end to the age-old conceptions of Shia realm that was built on an alliance between the shahs and the ‘ulama’.”³⁴

Planning and Implementation

The first plans for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s coronation can be traced to the late 1950s, when Iran announced its intention to hold imminently and concurrently the coronation ceremony and celebrations

²⁷“Muzih-yi javahirat-i saltanati,” *Ittila’at*, 26 October 1967, 44.

²⁸Menahem Merhav, *National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 35. On Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* in early Pahlavi nationalism, see Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 124–32.

²⁹Reza Ghods, “Iranian Nationalism and Reza Shah,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1991): 43.

³⁰Abd Al-Razzak ibn Najaf Kuli, *The Dynasty of the Kajars: The Reigning Royal Family of Persia*, trans. Harford Jones Brydges (London: John Bohn, 1833), 42.

³¹*Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran*, 82. According to British sources, the “aged Mullah of Khoi” shared the responsibility of delivering the Pahlavi crown to the shah with Court Minister ‘Abdulhusayn Tiymurtash, but this detail is absent in Persian accounts of the coronation. See Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1797: Reform and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2019), 141.

³²Yaghma’i, *Karnamih-yi Riza Shah-i Kabir*, 196.

³³Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796–1925* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999), 88; Donald Wilber, *Riza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran, 1878–1944* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2016), 116.

³⁴Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.



Figure 1. Reza Shah's coronation, 25 April 1926. From *Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran* (Tehran: Shura-yi Markazi-yi Jashn-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran, 1967).

marking the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great.³⁵ The regime gave two reasons for not holding the shah's coronation when he first ascended the throne in 1941. First, the Iranian constitution did not allow for the coronation of a king to take place before a crown prince was born.³⁶ On 31 October 1960, crown prince Reza was born, thus, according to the official narrative, fulfilling a "dream of the Iranian people," and from that time "all Iranians were waiting for the joyful announcement of the coronation."³⁷ This argument is undermined by the fact that the decision to hold the ceremony was taken two years before the crown prince was born. Second, and the reason most trumpeted by the shah and his court, the shah wished to wait until his country had developed sufficiently. He said, "It is not a source of pride and gratification to become a king of a poor people so in the past I had felt that a coronation ceremony was not justified."³⁸ By the 1960s, the shah's reforms were said to have brought Iran "to the forefront of the world," thus satisfying the second condition for holding a coronation ceremony.³⁹ By the late 1950s, when the coronation was first announced, however, the shah's White Revolution (1963) had not yet been implemented, and, although stable, Iran had not reached the levels of development it would by the late 1960s.

The real reason for delaying the ceremony was more practical. In 1941 Iran was under foreign occupation, Reza Shah had been forced into exile, and the Pahlavi dynasty itself faced an uncertain future. The rest of the decade had been one of struggle for the young shah, and he faced repeated threats to his throne

³⁵D.T. West report, 11 September 1959, National Archives, Foreign Office, London (henceforth FO) 371/140887.

³⁶Gerard de Villiers, *The Imperial Shah: An Informal Biography*, trans. June P. Wilson and Walter B. Michaels (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 277.

³⁷*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 34.

³⁸Ramesh Sanghvi, *Aryamehr: The Shah of Iran; A Political Biography* (London: Transorient, 1968), 322.

³⁹*Ibid.*

and his life. The shah had survived the oil nationalization crisis of the early 1950s, but not without foreign support.⁴⁰ By the time the decision to hold the coronation was taken at the end of the 1950s, the shah had consolidated his rule, and the event was intended to allow him to announce his arrival as a king in the Achaemenid mold, the type lauded by both romantic nationalist intellectuals, such as Hasan Pirniya, who referred to the “moral revolution” (*inqilāb-i akhlāqī*) that occurred under Cyrus the Great, and Western scholars, such as Arthur Christensen.⁴¹ Indeed, Christensen’s words were repeated often in pro-monarchy literature, including by the shah in *Inqilab-i Sifid* (The White Revolution), a treatise on the shah’s program of reforms, the second edition of which was purposefully published in the months leading up to the coronation. Referring to the principle of kingship in Iran, the shah wrote, quoting Christensen, “A real king in Iran is not only a political ruler, but is first and foremost a teacher and sage; one who does not only build roads, dams, bridges and canals, but also guides their [his subjects’] spirits, thoughts and hearts.”⁴²

The initial plan to hold the 2500th anniversary celebrations and the coronation at the same time was intended to enforce the idea that the shah belonged to an ancient and venerable line of Persian kings, beginning with Cyrus the Great. The fact that the shah’s ascent to the throne in 1941 marked exactly 2,500 years since Cyrus himself became the king of Persia in 559 B.C. was certainly not lost on the ideologues at the court.⁴³ The events were both, however, repeatedly delayed throughout the 1960s, until 1967, when the decision was made to hold them separately. According to British sources, the Imperial Court had made informal inquiries as to whether Queen Elizabeth II would be able to attend the coronation. The answer to this was negative because of “a convention [among European monarchies] that reigning Sovereigns are not invited to attend the Coronation of another.”⁴⁴ The desire to invite reigning sovereigns to the anniversary celebrations contributed, therefore, to the decision to hold the two events separately. In addition to matters of protocol, Iran in 1967 simply did not have the infrastructure to hold two large-scale national celebrations at the same time.⁴⁵

Until this time, the planning and execution of the coronation had been entrusted to the Central Council for the Imperial Celebrations (Shura-yi Markazi-yi Jashn-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran). However, on 23 February 1967, a *farmān* (imperial decree) was issued to order the establishment of a separate organizing committee, called the High Council for the Coronation (Shura-yi ‘Ali-yi Tajguzari), which consisted of fourteen subcommittees, each charged with executing specific aspects of the coronation celebration.⁴⁶ The head of the council was General Murtaza Yazdanpanah, who had held high positions under both Pahlavi shahs, including minister of war, general adjutant, senator, and director of the Imperial Inspectorate, and who was said by one historian to be “the oldest and most venerated general of his time.”⁴⁷ General Yazdanpanah also had the honor of being positioned behind Reza Shah during his coronation in 1926.⁴⁸ Even after the establishment of the High Council for the Coronation, the Central Council for the Imperial Celebrations continued to contribute to the organization of the coronation. Its deputy head, Mahdi Bushihri, sent a directive in March 1967 to local committees associated with the imperial celebrations to encourage them to participate in the coronation too, and the document outlining

⁴⁰See, for example, Ali Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État against Mosaddeq,” in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, ed. Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 227–260.

⁴¹Hasan Pirniya, “Qabl az Islam,” in *Tarikh-i Iran*, Hasan Pirniya, ‘Abbas Iqbal Ashtiyani, and Baqir ‘Aqili (Tehran: Nashr Namak, 2014), 82.

⁴²Pahlavi, *Inqilab-i Sifid*, 2–3. The quotation also was printed in books published by foreign embassies. See, for example, *Krönung Seiner Majestät Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlawi Aryamehr Kaiser von Iran und Ihrer Majestät Shahbanou Farah Pahlawi Kaiserin von Iran* (Vienna: Kaiserliche Iranische Botschaft, 1967).

⁴³Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, 183. Indeed, this very point was made when the discussions for the creation of a new imperial calendar were taking place in the 1960s.

⁴⁴J. R. Rich to Sir D. Allen, 28 August 1968, National Archives, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London (henceforth FCO) 57/69.

⁴⁵Denis Wright in an interview with Habib Ladjevardi, 10–11 October 1984, Aylesbury, UK, Iranian Oral History Collection, Harvard University, tape 4, 4.

⁴⁶*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 35, 58–69.

⁴⁷Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 65.

⁴⁸“Bidin Gunih Riza Shah Pahlavi Taj-i Shahanshahi ra bar Sar Guzasht,” *Rastakhiz*, 24 April 1976, 12–13.

the functions of the various subcommittees of the High Council for the Coronation was authored by the Central Council.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the Central Council provided significant funding for the coronation; some \$3 million was taken from its budget for this purpose.⁵⁰

In May 1966, the Iranian ambassadors to Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden were asked by the head of Queen Farah's office, Fazlullah Nabil, to send photographs and videos of and other information about coronation ceremonies that had taken place in those countries.⁵¹ The Iranian ambassador in London, Ardashir Zahidi, sent color film and photographs of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, as well as black and white footage of King George VI's coronation in 1937 and the official opening of Parliament.⁵² The ambassador in The Hague sent photo albums of the investiture of Queen Juliana in 1948, along with Persian translations of the investiture program.⁵³ It can be assumed, then, that it was no accident that aspects of the coronation in 1967 appeared to resemble the British and Dutch ceremonies. The shah placed great emphasis on his Pahlavi dynasty belonging to a global, specifically European, monarchical institution, and by replicating accepted European practice alongside Iranian custom, he was attempting to present his monarchy as belonging to both a Western and Iranian tradition.

Queen Farah was seemingly keen on the coronation of Elizabeth II; there was even a special screening of the ceremony at Sa'dabad Palace, and the young crown prince was apparently made "to model his deportment [during the coronation] on that of Prince Charles."⁵⁴ Indeed, when Nabil requested information about the coronation of Elizabeth II, he asked Ambassador Zahidi specifically about protocol relating to the presence and role of the crown prince during the ceremony.⁵⁵ The official program of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's ceremony also closely resembled that of Elizabeth II in 1953. Both programs opened with a poem specially composed for the occasion, the shah's by Iran's poet laureate Lutf'ali Suratgar and Elizabeth II's by British poet laureate John Masefield. Each alludes to nature to present the monarchy as belonging to the natural order of things. Masefield writes, "Now that we crown Her as our Queen / May love keep all her pathways green / May sunlight bless her days / May the fair Spring of her beginning / Ripen all things worth the winning."⁵⁶ In his ode (*qaṣīdih*) to the shah, Suratgar evokes the traditional depiction of the ruler as the shadow of God on earth:

The sunshine is abundant, whereas one is the shadow of God [on earth]
 This is what they call the characteristic of the King of Iran.
Aryamihr is that king, whose orders are heard and obeyed by young and old . . .
 If the king smiles, the flowers bloom
 If he is sad, [the flowers] hide their faces under their leaves.
 Oh, king, please look on young flowers with kindness
 So even the rose garden will envy the world.⁵⁷

⁴⁹Mahdi Bushihri, circular, 13 March 1967, in *Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 22.

⁵⁰"Guzarish-i 'Amaliyat-i Hisabdari-yi Shura-yi Markazi-yi Jashn-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran az Aval-i Mihr Mah-i 1339 Lighayat Shahrivar Mah-i 1351," 5 October 1972, in *Bazm-i Ahriman: Jashn-ha-yi 2500 Salih-yi Shahanshahi bih Rivayat-i Asnad-i Savak va Darbar*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasi-yi Asnad-i Tarikhi-yi Vizarat-i Ittila'at, 1999), 389–91.

⁵¹*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 1–8.

⁵²Ardashir Zahidi to Fazlullah Nabil, 9 August 1966, *ibid.*, 5.

⁵³Ahmad Zahir to Nabil, 26 August 1966, *ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴Nabil to Dr. Luqman, 22 August 1967, *ibid.*, 182; Denis Wright "Coronation of His Imperial Majesty the Shahanshah," 30 November 1967, FO 248/1637, 5.

⁵⁵Nabil to Zahedi, 30 May 1966, in *Zanan-i Darbar bih Revayat-i Asnad-i Savak: Farah Pahlavi*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasi-yi Asnad-i Tarikhi-yi Vizarat-i Ittila'at, 2008), 98.

⁵⁶John Masefield in *The Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2 June 1953* (London: King George's Jubilee Trust, 1953), 2.

⁵⁷Lutf'ali Suratgar in *Tajguzari-yi A'lahazrat Humayun Muhammad Riza Pahlavi Aryamihr Shahanshah-i Iran va 'Ulyahazrat Farah Pahlavi Shahbanu-yi Iran* (Tehran, 1967), 2. Thanks to Domenico Ingenito for his very helpful comments on this translation. Persian text:

بیشمار است آفتاب و سایه یزدان یکیست / این صفت را ویژه شاهنشاه ایران کنند
 آریامهر آن شهنشاهی که از برنا و پیر / چشم بر حکمش نهند و گوش بر فرمان کنند

...

Each program then includes a short essay discussing the importance of the coronation ceremony to the nation. In the introduction to Elizabeth II's booklet, the historian Arthur Bryant declares that "A coronation is a nation's birthday. It is the day on which its people celebrate the union that makes them one."⁵⁸ The author of the shah's coronation booklet ascribes similar importance to the coronation ceremony: "There is no doubt that in most kingdoms, of all the traditions and events, the coronation has been the most meaningful expression of the reign [of the monarch] and the monarchy."⁵⁹

Crowning the "Sun of the Aryans"

In the years following the removal of Muhammad Mosaddeq in 1953, the Pahlavi regime placed increasing emphasis on presenting the monarchy as a source of national unity. This message was delivered, in part, by adopting invented symbols and titles that had ancient roots. One important example was the title *Aryamihir*, which was conceived by the scholar Sadiq Kiya and granted to the shah in a special joint session of the senate and majlis, held on 15 September 1965 to commemorate the beginning of the shah's twenty-fifth year on the throne.⁶⁰ During this session, which was led by the head of the senate, Jafar Sharif Imami, several speakers were selected to describe the transformative effect the two Pahlavi kings had had on the situation of Iran, and their status as great monarchs in the annals of Iranian history. Speakers at the session included the eighty-six-year-old Mahmud Jam, who had served as prime minister under Reza Shah; parliamentary leader of the Mardum (People's) party, Hulaku Rambud; and editor of the quasi-official *Ittila'at* newspaper, 'Abbas Mas'udi. In his speech Rambud emphatically declared that "the twenty-four years of the *Shahanshah* [King of Kings] is one of the most glorious pages of the long history of Iran." At the end of the session, both houses voted to confer this new title upon the shah, for his "precious services" on behalf of the nation.⁶¹

Two months later, Kiya published a fifteen-page article in the journal *Hunar va Mardum* (Art and People), explaining the roots of the term *Āryāmihir* (Sun of the Aryans). A more extensive study on the origins and formulation of the title was published in 1967 by the Ministry of Culture and Art to commemorate the coronation. In the introduction, Kiya explains why the shah was granted this honorific:

"*Āryāmihir*" means the "Sun of the Aryans" (*khūrshīd-i āriyā*) and is befitting such a king, who is purely Iranian in essence, and who has worked with all his might and has done brilliant things for the comfort, development and pride of Iranians.⁶²

Kiya proceeds to show the Avestan, Old Persian, and Sanskrit roots of the terms *āriyā* (Aryan) and *mihir* (sun). The purpose of creating and granting these titles was to set the shah apart from his forebears, including his father, who already had the title *Kabir* (the Great) and whose achievements the shah intended to surpass.

At the time of the coronation, several other commemorative books were published, which stressed the ancientness of the coronation ceremony in the history of Iran. These included *Ayin-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran* (Imperial Traditions of Iran) by Zabihullah Safa, and *Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran* (The Coronation of Iranian Kings), compiled and published by the Central Council for the Imperial Celebrations. The latter provides an overview of coronation ceremonies throughout Iranian history, beginning with the Achaemenid kings and ending with the coronation of Reza Shah.⁶³ It begins by explaining that the purpose of the ceremony is to reinforce the king's bond with his people, before linking the shah to a long line of great kings:

چهر شه گر بشکند گلها بیاریند چهر / ور دژم گردد بزیر برگ رخ پنهان کنند
بفکن ایشه نوگلان را گوشه چشمی بمهر / تا ز کشی باغ را رشک نگرستان کنند

⁵⁸Coronation of Her Majesty, 8.

⁵⁹Tajguzari-yi A'lahazrat Humayun, 10.

⁶⁰Mashruh-i Jaryan-i Jaliasih-yi Tarikhi-yi Mushtarak-i Majlisayn: Bih Munasibat Aghaz-i Rab' Qirn-i Saltanat va Jajlil az Fadakari-ha-yi 24 Salih Shahanshah," *Ittila'at*, 16 September 1965, 27.

⁶¹Ibid., 31.

⁶²Sadiq Kiya, *Aryamihir* (Tehran: Vizarat-i Farhang va Hunar, 1967).

⁶³Zabihullah Safa, *Ayin-i Shahanshahi-i Iran* (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1967); *Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran*.

The coronation of the kings and the participation of the Iranian people in the rejoiced and delightful ceremony is one of the ancient traditions of the Persians, which strengthens the foundations of the relationship between the king and the people.

By performing the ceremony of the coronation, great kings such as Kurush, Daryush, Ardashir-i Babakan, Khusraw Anushirvan, Shah Isma‘il Safavi, Shah ‘Abbas, Nadir Shah Afshar and Reza Shah Kabir, have become ever closer to the people.⁶⁴

The coronation ceremony of the shah was hailed as an expression of his readiness to take his place in this illustrious company. The event also was supposed to demonstrate the ability of the monarchy to adapt, evolve, and ultimately lead Iran into the modern world. The program of the ceremony included the following lines:

The Iranian crown with the feathers which stand above it is a symbol that bestows upon the crowned kings and the one who crowns a serious responsibility, obliging them through fortitude and self-sacrifice to connect the glorious past of this nation to distant bright future horizons of progress, comfort, peace and calm.⁶⁵

It was the responsibility of the crown, that most powerful symbol of ancientness, then, to steer the nation forward into the future.

At the planning stage of the coronation, two special subcommittees were set up as part of the organizing council to stimulate public participation. The first, chaired by the governor of Tehran, was called the Decorations Committee (*Kumitih-yi Tazi‘inat*) and was tasked with arranging illuminations and decorations in Tehran. As a result of their efforts, during the weeklong coronation celebrations Tehran’s streets were adorned with so many decorative lamps that *Ittila‘at* called the city “the most beautiful and luminous city in the world.” On the evening after the coronation a fireworks display was held, which was said to be “the most magnificent and spectacular . . . ever held in this country.”⁶⁶ The other was the Townships Committee (*Kumitih-yi Shahristan-ha*), the goal of which was to ensure that local festivities were held across the country.⁶⁷ Penalties were doled out to officials who did not produce satisfactory results. For example, domestic tourists who travelled to Shiraz from Mashhad, Isfahan, Tehran, Kerman and “even Qom” commented that the illuminations were inferior to those in their cities and that “the people in Shiraz have not made an effort.”⁶⁸ As punishment for this lack of effort, it was rumored that the governor of Fars was removed from his post and relegated to the Ministry of the Interior.⁶⁹

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s coronation generally followed the precedent set by his father, including the use of some of the same regalia. These included the royal cloak (*shinil-i a‘lahazrat shāhanshāh*), the royal sword (*shamshir-i saltanatī*), the royal scepter (*aṣā-yi saltanatī*), the golden belt (*kamarband-i zarrin*), and finally the Pahlavi crown (*tāj-i Pahlavī*).⁷⁰ Three of the pieces—the cloak, scepter, and crown—had been made for the coronation of Reza Shah and were thus original Pahlavi additions. The belt and sword, however, were both made during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848–96). The sword had been presented to Nasir al-Din Shah by his grand vizier (*vazir-i a‘zam*), Mirza ‘Ali Asghar Khan, in 1895, and was inscribed with the name of the king.⁷¹ There were other remnants of the Qajar past, too. The shah sat on the Nadiri throne, which was built during the reign of Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834), and the whole

⁶⁴*Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran*, preface.

⁶⁵*Tajguzari-yi A‘lahazrat Humayun*, 23.

⁶⁶“Tihran Zibatarin va Purnurtarin Shahr-i Jahan,” *Ittila‘at*, 26 October 1967, 73; “The Night of Nights in Tehran,” *Kayhan International*, 28 October 1967, 1.

⁶⁷*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 67.

⁶⁸SAVAK report, 29 October 1967, *ibid.*, 393.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 394. There is no indication in the report as to whether there was any truth to this rumor.

⁷⁰*Tajguzari-yi A‘lahazrat Humayun*, 46–52. The seventeen pieces that were present during Reza Shah’s coronation were absent, significantly the Qajar crown.

⁷¹“Muzih-yi Javahirat-i Saltanati,” *Ittila‘at*, 26 October 1967, 47. It is interesting that this sword was chosen for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi over the “world conquering” sword of Nadir Shah that was worn by his father during his coronation.

ceremony took place in the Gulistan Palace, a continuation of Qajar tradition. Other locations were considered, however. When the plan had been to hold the coronation at the same time as the anniversary celebrations, there was some discussion about holding the ceremony at Persepolis.⁷²

At nine in the morning on 26 October 1967, fifteen battalions, representing different units of the Imperial Armed Forces, marched from the Bagh-i Shah barracks to assume various positions in central Tehran. At 10:10, the imperial couple left the Marble Palace (*kākh-i marmar*) by carriage and proceeded toward Gulistan Palace, where they entered through the northern gate and continued to the Hall of Mirrors (*tālār-i āynih*) in the north of the palace complex. From there they entered the adjacent Museum Hall, or Reception Hall (*tālār-i salām*), which recently had been refurbished for the occasion, with glistening chandeliers suspended from its vaulted ceiling and Persian carpets covering its floors. First the crown prince entered the hall and sat to the left of the shah's Nadiri throne, then Queen Farah, who sat to the right, followed finally by the shah.⁷³ When all the royals and other guests had taken their seats, the ceremony began. First the Friday prayer leader of Tehran, Sayyid Hasan Imami, recited a verse from the Qur'an in Arabic, delivered a sermon, and presented the shah with a Qur'an, which he kissed. Then, one by one, the pieces of coronation regalia were brought forward. The shah picked up the crown with both hands, turning it carefully so that the biggest jewel faced the front, and placed it on his head.⁷⁴ Finally, the shah took the royal scepter and ascended the throne to a 101 gun salute. Afterward, the queen, aided by courtiers, presented herself to the shah and was crowned.

Following this, speeches were given, first by the prime minister, Amir 'Abbas Hoveyda, then the head of the senate, Ja'far Sharif Imami, then the head of the majlis, Abdullah Riyazi, and finally poet laureate Professor Lutf'ali Suratgar of the University of Tehran, who offered thanks from the scholars and cultural personalities of the country and delivered his ode to the shah. Tellingly, these people were not court ministers or generals in the army, but figures one would associate with a modern democracy: the message was that the shah derived legitimacy from both the traditional monarchical structure and the modern political structure. After the shah's speech, which will be discussed shortly, the imperial family left the hall. Following a short rest, a procession took them through the Gulistan Palace gardens, where pristine red carpets had been laid and viewing stands had been erected to accommodate some five thousand spectators, then back through the streets of Tehran to the Marble Palace. British Ambassador Denis Wright described the crowds lining the street as being in a "genuine holiday mood" and breaking into cries of "long live the Shahanshah" when the imperial couple came into sight.⁷⁵ Some of the regime's supporters were more bombastic in their praise; one author wrote that with the crown on the shah's head the "heart of every Iranian was immersed in eternal joy and happiness."⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the apparent simplicity of the ceremony, there is a lot that we can understand from it about the type of monarchy the shah envisioned and the role of religion in his Iran. Although the shah's ceremony was not as overtly religious as, for example, the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, religion nonetheless played a significant role. It is often said of the shah that his political ideology sought to replace religion with a political culture centered on the throne, but in the coronation ceremony we see attempts not to replace one with the other, but to marry the two. This was perceptible in the use of language. In a special hymn sung by a choir from the Ministry of Culture and Art as the shah entered the coronation hall, he was referred to as both the "glory of the crown" (*fakhr-i tāj-i kiyān*), and "the shadow of God" (*sāyih-i Khudā*), and the special Qur'an that the shah kissed at the beginning of the ceremony was referred to by the organizers as the *Qur'an-i Aryamihir*.⁷⁷

One of the principle roles of the Iranian monarch had been, since Safavid times, to protect the 'ulama', and in Reza Shah's coronation speech, he cast himself in this traditional role of defender of

⁷²See "Duvvumin Guzarish-i Mutali'at-i Shura-yi Markazi-yi Jashn-ha-yi 2500 Salah-yi Shahanshahi-yi Iran," January 1961, in *Bazm-i Ahriman*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasi-yi Asnad-i Tarikhi-yi Vizarat-i Ittila'at, 1998), 101.

⁷³*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 29–40.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 42–43.

⁷⁵Wright, "Coronation of His Imperial Majesty," 3.

⁷⁶Sanghvi, *Aryamehr*, 322. A propaganda video of the ceremony was released as part of the Pahlavi regime's public diplomacy. Not only was it a visual record of the ceremony itself, but it also illustrated the aspects of the ceremony that the regime wanted to draw attention to.

⁷⁷*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 42, 313.

Islam. Some accounts of the ceremony even state that no music was played out of respect for religious sensibilities.⁷⁸ Mohammad Reza Shah's speech, on the other hand, lacked any reference to religion, and resembled more the Dutch oath, in which the monarch pledged to "constantly preserve and uphold the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Constitution." The monarch must further state:

I swear (affirm) that I shall defend and preserve the independence and the territory of the Kingdom to the best of my ability, that I shall protect the freedom and rights and all Dutch citizens and residents, and that I shall employ all means placed at my disposal by the law to preserve and promote prosperity, as is incumbent upon a good and faithful Sovereign. So help me God!⁷⁹

The substance of the shah's speech was remarkably similar. He also pledged to ensure the independence of his country and to promote prosperity. From his throne (Fig. 2), he said:

The only goal of my life is the ever-increasing advancement of the country and nation of Iran, and I have nothing but a desire to preserve the independence and sovereignty of this country, and to bring Iran to the status of the most progressive and prosperous societies of the world. I will revive the ancient glory of this land and restore its historical pride. To this end I am willing, as I have always been, to lay down my life.⁸⁰

In contrast to other European monarchies, since 1814 Dutch monarchs have not been crowned, and the investiture ceremony has been a purely constitutional event, the idea being to completely separate church and state.⁸¹ The Pahlavi monarchy, too, which was "legislated" into existence, to borrow Ali Ansari's term, by the fifth Majlis, acquired legitimacy from the legal framework of the state, not from the religious establishment.⁸²

Although the shah did not derive legitimacy from the 'ulama', he did do so from Shi'ism. Six days after the coronation ceremony, in an event featured in the official coronation program, the shah visited Mashhad for the *mab'ath* (the commemoration of the day Mohammad received his first revelation) to show his religious devotion, along with several figures who had participated in the coronation, such as 'Alam, Hoveyda, Riyazi, and Sharif-Imami.⁸³ The shah was pictured on the front page of *Ittila'at* in the same military uniform he wore during the coronation, surrounded by courtiers, shaking hands with Ayatollah Mirza Ahmad Kafayi, who taught at Gawharshad Mosque, and inside the paper he was pictured praying solemnly at the mausoleum of Imam Reza.⁸⁴ By not allowing the 'ulama' a prominent role in the coronation ceremony, but then shortly after traveling to Mashhad himself to take part in this religious rite, the shah enforced his credentials as a spiritual leader independent of the traditional religious structures.

Other aspects of the coronation also emulated European examples. The gilded coach that brought the imperial couple to Gulistan Palace was constructed in Vienna by master coach-maker Joseph Kliemann, who came from an illustrious family of coach-makers that constructed coaches for Emperor Franz Joseph and who proclaimed himself "the last man in his trade" (Fig. 3).⁸⁵ According to the British ambassador,

⁷⁸Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 141. Husayn Makki, however, notes the presence of a military band outside Gulistan Palace and other accounts mention a hymn being sung as the shah entered the coronation hall. See Husayn Makki, *Tarikh-i Bist Salih-yi Iran*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Nashr-i Nashir, 1982), 33; and *Tajguzari-yi Shahanshahan-i Iran*, 82. It is likely, therefore, that music did have some role in the coronation.

⁷⁹"Investiture," Royal House of the Netherlands, accessed 20 December 2020, <http://www.royal-house.nl/topics/royal-house/investiture>.

⁸⁰*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 53.

⁸¹During the investiture ceremony, coronation regalia, including the crown, are present, symbolizing the historical institution, but they are not presented to the monarch; they play no active role.

⁸²Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, 82.

⁸³*Tajguzari-yi A'lahazrat Humayun*, 59.

⁸⁴"Salam-i Mab'ath dar Aghaz-i Panzdahamin Qarn-i Tulu'i Islam," *Ittila'at*, 1 November 1967, 1.

⁸⁵"Kaliskih-yi Tajguzari-yi Shahanshah," *Ittila'at*, 30 January 1967, 16; *Kayhan International*, 26 October 1967, 14; Milani, *Shah*, 231.



Figure 2. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's speech from the throne. © Marilyn Silverstone/Magnum Photos.

the “spectacular fireworks” came from Germany.⁸⁶ Even the military escort has been described by one historian as looking “strikingly like [British] Life Guards.”⁸⁷ On the evening after the coronation the new concert venue Rudaki Hall was inaugurated by the shah and Queen Farah, and over the course of the following week a number of renowned orchestras and companies from around the world performed there, such as the Grand Ballet Classique of France, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, the Virtuosi di Roma, the Beethovenhalle Orchestra of Bonn, and the Iranian National Ballet Company, which presented a program of ballet to the music of Bizet, Verdi, and Ostovar.⁸⁸ This European presence reflected the royal family’s European tastes, but also the shah’s desire to prove, as Amanat has written, “that he was no less majestic than his European counterparts.”⁸⁹

European influence was nowhere more perceptible than in the role and countenance of Queen Farah. Prior to the coronation, because there was no precedent in Iran for crowning a queen, a new crown had to be designed. Two questions occupied the organizers regarding the design of this crown. First, should it be

⁸⁶Wright, “Coronation of His Imperial Majesty,” 4.

⁸⁷Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 169.

⁸⁸“Programme of Events at Rudaki Hall,” undated newspaper clipping, FO 248/1637.

⁸⁹Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, 666.



Figure 3. The coronation coach. From *Krönung Seiner Majestät Mohammad Reza Schah Pahlawi Aryamehr Kaiser von Iran und Ihrer Majestät Schahbanou Farah Pahlawi Kaiserin von Iran* (Vienna: Kaiserliche Iranische Botschaft, 1967).

similar to the Pahlavi crown? Second, “should it be Iranian in form, or not?”⁹⁰ The organizers opted for a more European design by the jeweler Van Cleef and Arpels, whose drawing was chosen out of fifty proposals submitted “by the greatest jewellers of the time.”⁹¹ The crown was set with 36 emeralds, 34 rubies, 2 spinels, 105 pearls, and 1,469 diamonds from the crown treasury, and weighed close to 1.5 kilograms.⁹² Queen Farah’s dress and cloak were designed and manufactured by Christian Dior, although the Iranian press was eager to stress that they had been sewn by an Iranian citizen.⁹³ Most of the materials for the dress and cloak were purchased from around the world, including velvet cloth produced by Bianchini in Paris, mink fur from Switzerland, and crystals from Austria.⁹⁴ The dress itself had a long train, which, like Queen Elizabeth II’s cloak in 1953 and that of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, in 1937, was carried by her attendants (Fig. 4).

The crowning of Queen Farah had profound importance both as a reflection of the rising status of women in Iran and in shaping foreign attitudes toward the Iranian monarchy. In the days prior to the coronation ceremony, articles 38, 41, and 42 of the Supplement to the Constitution were amended to change the process of royal succession. According to the changes, the minimum age for a future shah to assume the throne would be twenty, and if the reigning monarch died before his crown prince reached the requisite age, the queen would serve as regent until he was ready.⁹⁵ According to Gholam Reza Afkhami, this presented “a near paradigm shift in Iran; the idea that a woman would legally take over the king’s functions in his absence had the potential of qualitatively improving all women’s status and rights.”⁹⁶ The crowning of Queen Farah served two purposes, practical and symbolic. First, it underlined the intent of the constitutional amendment, firmly establishing the royal authority of the Shahbanu (Lady Shah). Second, it illustrated that the Iranian monarchy was not stagnant; it was evolving and modernizing both to reflect and to bring about changes in society. When the shah crowned his queen, he connected ancient tradition with an act of modernity. “At this time, when I have on my head the crown of the world’s most ancient kingdom,” he said, “for the first time in Iranian history, a Shahbanu has also been crowned.”⁹⁷

⁹⁰*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 183.

⁹¹“The Coronation Set of Empress Farah Pahlavi,” Van Cleef and Arpels, accessed on 10 December 2019, <https://www.van-cleefarpels.com/ww/en/la-maison/special-orders/historical-special-orders/the-coronation-set-of-empress-farah-pahlavi.html>

⁹²*Die Kron-juwelen* (Tehran: Iranische Zentralbank, 1972), 40–41.

⁹³“Paris? Nothing to Do with It!” *Kayhan International*, 5 November 1967.

⁹⁴Mas’ud Barzin report, 13 February 1973, in *Zanan-i Darbar*, 188.

⁹⁵Gholam Reza Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 248.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 249.

⁹⁷*Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 53.



Figure 4. The crowning of Farah Pahlavi. © Marilyn Silverstone/Magnum Photos.

Queen Farah's crowning, however, was not presented as a comment on the evolution of the status of women in Iran, but on the wisdom of the shah for bestowing such an honor on his wife. Of the 1963 electoral law reforms, which granted women the right to vote, one official Iranian publication observed, "It was the shah and not the feminists who struck the next blow against inequality."⁹⁸ In other words, if Iran was to modernize, it had to rely on the throne, not political movements against social inequality. The enfranchisement of women was said to be "not only a humanitarian gesture but a brilliant political move. With the wind taken out of their sails of protest, women were forced into positive activity."⁹⁹ A similar point was made during the aforementioned special joint session of the senate and majlis to mark the beginning of the shah's twenty-fifth year on the throne, by Shukat Malik Jahanbani, one of the first women elected in September 1963 to the twenty-first Majlis.¹⁰⁰ Although the position of women had improved under the Pahlavis, she argued, real societal change only occurred after the direct intervention of the shah through the White Revolution:

⁹⁸Gregory Lima et al., *The Revolutionizing of Iran* (Tehran: International Communications, 1973), 103.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰"Kar dar Majlisiin Aghaz Shod," *Ittila'at*, 26 September 1963, 13.

Still no one believed that Iranian women could achieve their political rights, but the Shahanshah once again displayed his God-given genius with the revolution of 6 Bahman when rights were granted to women, farmers, peasants, workers, and a new and golden page was added to the long history of Iran.¹⁰¹

The act of crowning his queen, therefore, had more to do with advancing the perception of the shah as a modernizer than with actually bestowing power upon his wife. Even the power invested was contingent on the shah dying before his son reached the age of twenty, and the constitution still stipulated that only a male heir could take the throne.¹⁰² This idea of social progress imposed top-down was endorsed and trumpeted by the state-sponsored Women's Organization of Iran, which was affiliated with Princess Ashraf. This organization held a street carnival, published a picture album showing the status of women in society over the prior fifty years, released a commemorative gold medal, and arranged a picture exhibition on women in the period between the coronations of the two Pahlavi monarchs.¹⁰³

The crowning of the queen also helped to ingratiate the Iranian monarchy with the Western order, and foreign newspapers praised this aspect of the event. One referred to the coronation of Farah as "a gesture by the Shah, who believes that women should be emancipated." *Time* noted that this was "the ceremonial affirmation of her importance to the throne" and the empress herself was called "the young queen who is mother to all of Persia's children."¹⁰⁴ The romance of the story of the former architecture student Farah Diba becoming the crowned Empress of Persia was enthusiastically pursued by the foreign press, too. One Turkish newspaper declared, for example, that "the coronation of Queen Farah Diba in Tehran will be like a tale from A Thousand and One Nights."¹⁰⁵

Although the institution the shah represented could be said to be fundamentally oriental and different, Queen Farah became the human, Western face of the monarchy. A headline in the *Daily Mail* read, "Farah Dibah looked every inch a proud crowned Empress but also a very happy wife." Beyond the veneer of regal splendor, the shah and his queen were presented as an ordinary couple:

As she rose and raised her eyes, she looked straight into his and a gentle, almost imperceptible secret smile flickered between them. Hers seemed to say: Thank you. And his: Well done. This scene seemed to come straight out of fairyland.¹⁰⁶

From a public relations perspective, the crowning of Farah was a profound success. An Iranian publication from 1973, which was published in English for an international audience, declared that "Empress Farah never talks about women's lib. She doesn't have to. Her whole life is a shining example of what a woman can do in Iran if she has the will."¹⁰⁷

Foreign Participation

What was exceptional about the coronation of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in contrast to that of his father, was the broadcasting of the event around the world and the efforts made by Iranian embassies to stimulate foreign participation. To an international audience, the glamor of the event, the familiar look of the coronation regalia and military escorts, and the fact that a queen was crowned for the first time, appeared to prove the success of the shah's modernization efforts. Pathé News even reported the event alongside the British State Opening of Parliament, cutting seamlessly between the two ceremonies to stress the similarities.¹⁰⁸ Reports in the foreign press, too, were generally amenable. The *Financial Times* declared the

¹⁰¹"Mashruh-i Jariyan-i Jalish-yi Tarikhi-yi Mushtarak-i Majlisin," *Ittila'at*, 11 September 1965, 27.

¹⁰²Paidar, *Women*, 158.

¹⁰³*Jashn-i Tajuzari*, 141–3.

¹⁰⁴Noel Whitecomb, "The Emancipated Queen," *Sun*, 27 October 1967; Abby Gail, "The Young Queen Who Is Mother to All of Persia's Children," *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1967.

¹⁰⁵Cited in Persian translation in *Jashn-i Tajuzari*, 296.

¹⁰⁶Rhona Churchill, "Farah Dibah Looked Every Inch a Proud Crowned Empress but also a Very Happy Wife," *Daily Mail*, 27 October 1967.

¹⁰⁷Lima, *Revolutionizing of Iran*, 101.

¹⁰⁸British Pathé (Pathé News archive), newsreel 2045.20, 2 November 1967.

shah “a monarch better than his crown”; in this context, a shah more modern and enlightened than the country he ruled.¹⁰⁹ And an article in *The Scotsman* published before the event contrasted the shah’s self-crowning to that of Napoleon:

When Napoleon Buonaparte seized the crown from an outraged Pope in Rome in 1804 and jammed it squarely on his head, the arrogance and blasphemy of the act shocked the entire world. But when the Shah of Iran crowns himself, it will be both just and proper—the prerogative of a ruler whose heritage stretches back 2,500 years.¹¹⁰

Echoing this theme, in an article in the Israeli newspaper *Davar*, referring to the many jewels in the shah’s crown, the author writes that because of his many successes, “the Shah has shown himself worthy of such a crown.”¹¹¹ As Parvin Paidar has noted, this positive image of the Pahlavi regime as a force for progress endured in the Western press into the 1970s.¹¹²

Foreign missions also participated in and contributed to the coronation festivities. The travel costs and performance fees of the music performances at Rudaki Hall, such as by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, were funded by the countries from which the orchestras hailed. The Imperial Court apparently even requested that the American embassy attempt to bring Frank Sinatra to Iran to perform at a banquet in the shah’s honor.¹¹³ Ambassadors and other political representatives were present during the coronation, either in the Museum Hall itself or in the seating area in the palace gardens, and their embassies also were decorated for the occasion. The British embassy, which was located on the processional route from Gulistan to the Marble Palace, was able to “put on quite a display at a very moderate cost.”¹¹⁴ Its walls were lined with flower pots and decorative lights in the colors of the Iranian flag, and the embassy was, according to the ambassador’s report, mentioned in the press as having set a good precedent for other missions.

Messages of support and gifts from foreign heads of state also were gratefully received by the Iranians and were duly publicized in the local press. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson offered his “sincere congratulations,” adding that “we in Britain have watched with admiration and pleasure the notable achievements of the Iranian people at home and the growing stature of Iran in the world, which have been brought about under Your Majesty’s inspiring leadership.”¹¹⁵ The shah claimed to be “deeply touched” by the message. “It is indeed most gratifying that the close ties of alliance and friendship binding our two countries,” he wrote, “have always been founded on mutual understanding and good will.”¹¹⁶ Either this was a standard reply to such messages, or the Imperial Court was attempting to re-write history to reflect its burgeoning position as equal to the British. As a further indication of the shah’s elevated position internationally, gifts were personally presented to him by foreign ambassadors in an event at Sa’dabad Palace two days after the coronation. One of the most striking gifts was a scaled model of Persepolis, presented by the German ambassador. Among the gold, silver, silk, crystal, china, and ivory, the Dutch ambassador was reportedly embarrassed by his country’s “wholly inadequate” contribution: a cardboard carton containing a variety of flower bulbs.¹¹⁷

In addition to the participation of foreign governments in Tehran, Iranian embassies around the world held programs of celebrations. In Delhi, for instance, from 23–30 October many events took place, among

¹⁰⁹“A Monarch Better Than His Crown,” *Financial Times*, undated newspaper clipping, FCO 17/403.

¹¹⁰“The Shah Claims His Crown,” *Scotsman*, 1 October 1967.

¹¹¹Cited in *Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 436.

¹¹²Paidar, *Women*, 150.

¹¹³R. T. Eland report, 6 October 1967, FO 248/1637.

¹¹⁴Wright, “Coronation of His Imperial Majesty,” 4.

¹¹⁵Denis Wright to Asadullah ‘Alam, 23 October 1967, FO 248/1637.

¹¹⁶“Text of Telegraphic Message Received from His Imperial Majesty the Shahanshah, Addressed to the Right Hon. Harold Wilson,” undated, FO 248/1637.

¹¹⁷Wright, “Coronation Gifts for the Shah,” 30 October 1967, FO 248/1637. To make up for this embarrassment, the Netherlands was one of the only countries to bring a gift for the 2500th anniversary celebrations of 1971, when gifts were discouraged by the Imperial Court. See Robert Steele, “Pahlavi Iran on the Global Stage: The Shah’s 1971 Persepolis Celebrations,” in *The Age of Aryamehr: Late Pahlavi Iran and its Global Entanglements*, ed. Roham Alvandi (London: Gingko Library, 2018), 116–17.

them a “magnificent reception” at the Oberoi Intercontinental, the “most luxurious hotel in Delhi,” a “magnificent gathering” of one thousand political figures and VIPs at the Iranian embassy, and a series of lectures at the University of Delhi. Commemorations of the coronation also were observed in other Indian cities, including Lucknow, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and Bombay.¹¹⁸ The program in Argentina included film screenings, the distribution of the articles of the White Revolution, cocktail parties, receptions, and plans to unveil a replica column from Persepolis in Iran Square in Palermo, Buenos Aires.¹¹⁹ Not all foreign participation was prompted by Iranian embassies; foreign states found many ways to contribute. For instance, several countries, including Pakistan, released special stamps to mark the occasion, and, in Ankara, the street on which the Iranian consulate was located was renamed Farah Diba.¹²⁰

Conclusion

The shah’s coronation was, as all coronations are, choreographed to reflect a marriage between tradition and the political reality of the times, and to confirm the place of the monarch and the monarchy in the state’s historical narrative. When the shah took the throne as a young man he was told to reign, not rule, but the gradual elimination of his political opponents, the weakening of the aristocracy, and some strategic maneuvering had propelled the shah to the center of Iranian political life. In one of the works published at the time of the coronation, ‘Abdulusayn Navai wrote, “History speaks of the fact that in the most difficult moments of life, [the people] have always looked to the action and language of their king.”¹²¹ The coronation was a pivotal moment in the articulation of this message.

In many ways, the coronation was a dress rehearsal for the much grander 2500th anniversary celebrations, which finally took place in 1971. The messages delivered through these two spectacles were very similar, placing the Pahlavis within a long line of venerable Iranian dynasties and presenting the shah as the embodiment of the ideals of modern liberalism: during the coronation one of the major themes was women’s rights, and in the imperial celebrations it was human rights. During the coronation, traditions were borrowed from European ceremonies in part for the shah to assert his and Iran’s sovereign equality to the crowned heads of Europe. Not everyone was convinced, and there was still a degree of condescension in the way in which the shah’s regime was perceived by some Westerners. For instance, US diplomat George Ball, who was present at the ceremony, wrote in his memoir:

What an absurd, bathetic spectacle! The son of a colonel in a Persian Cossack regiment play-acting as the emperor of a country with an average per capita income of \$250 per year, proclaiming his achievements in modernizing his nation while accoutred in the raiment and symbols of ancient despotism.¹²²

Even the British ambassador, in his report on the event, although he was generally positive, commented that the procession following the parade “did not compare with the cavalcade of Her Majesty the Queen’s Coronation [in 1953].”¹²³ Such a comparison might seem innocent enough, but the shah cared about how he was perceived by journalists and political figures, and it was a desire to live up to their standards that prompted such expenditure and foreign influence on not just the coronation, but also later events.

In spite of the regime’s efforts to encourage public participation in the coronation around the country, it is difficult to judge the success of this outside of the major cities. One Italian photographer who attempted to capture the coronation celebrations in the Alborz in a “typically Iranian village,” found not only that “there was no sign of any preparations for the festivities of any sort but the inhabitants of the village seemed hardly aware of the fact that the Coronation was about to take place at all.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁸Jalal ‘Abduh to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 October 1967, in *Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 317–19.

¹¹⁹Ali Fatuhi to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 August 1967, *ibid.*, 191–92. Although the column, La Columna del Templo Persa, was intended for delivery in time for the coronation, it did not arrive until 1972 and was finally erected in December 1978.

¹²⁰“Farah Diba Street,” *Kayhan International*, 27 October 1967, 3.

¹²¹*Namih-yi Taj* (Tabriz: Danishgah-i Adabiyat va ‘Ulum-i Insani-yi Tabriz, 1967), 5.

¹²²George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: Norton, 1982), 435.

¹²³Wright “Coronation of His Imperial Majesty,” 3.

¹²⁴P. Bernge to Mr. Timms, 1 November 1967, FO 248/1637.

Similar scenes were apparently found in other remote villages, leading to the conclusion that despite the regime's attempts to stimulate widespread support for the monarchy, it had not managed to reach everywhere with its propaganda.

The coronation successfully put the Pahlavi monarchy center stage, but in doing so it intensified discussions about the role of the monarch in the political, social, cultural, and religious life of Iran. In the weeks leading up to the coronation, the dissident cleric Ruhollah Khomeini wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Hoveyda from Najaf, in which he complained about exile and criticized the upcoming coronation.¹²⁵ In the madrasas, speculation about the cost of the coronation was widespread and some of Khomeini's allies in Qom, including Husayn-ʿAli Muntaziri, met each week to collate information about the cost of the coronation to distribute on the day.¹²⁶ There was speculation in Qom that the Israeli government had spent half a million dollars on two statues of Jamshid Jam and Darius the Great, and one person said, "this shows that the Shah and the government of Iran is at one with Israel and their [Iran's] support of the Arabs is superficial."¹²⁷ There was some distribution of leaflets critical of the regime by opposition groups, and abroad there were some protests outside Iranian consulates.¹²⁸ However, inside Iran the security services were generally relaxed and seemed more concerned with artists producing and selling unofficial coronation merchandise.¹²⁹ In spite of the relatively low-key nature of the opposition, the coronation sowed the seeds of discontent, particularly religious, that would increase in ferocity and frequency in subsequent years. Just four years later, during the imperial celebrations, the shah's opponents of disparate political hues were able to join together in common opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy.

The coronation and imperial celebrations were followed by a series of other spectacles, such as the tenth anniversary of the White Revolution in 1973, the Asian Games in 1974, and the fiftieth anniversary of Pahlavi rule in 1976–77. Babak Rahimi has argued that the state patronage and subsequent expansion and dramatization of the Muharram rituals during the rule of Shah ʿAbbas initiated the operation of the Safavid Empire "as a 'Theater State' based on pomp and pageantry."¹³⁰ The famous Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan in Isfahan became a huge performance space, and from the viewing platform of ʿAli Qapu Palace the shah could watch over his kingdom. From the coronation ceremony onward, the Pahlavi regime could be said to have initiated its own "theater state," as these spectacles allowed the Pahlavi monarchy to insert itself into the fabric of Iranian cultural, social, and political life. At the time of the revolution, plans were afoot to construct a new city center in ʿAbbas Abad in north Tehran called Shahistan-i Pahlavi, with a central Shah and Nation Square (Maydan-i Shah va Millat) that would be even larger than the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan. Like the square in Isfahan, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's square would be the space upon which the major Pahlavi political ceremonies would be enacted. The age of the Great Civilization also would be the age of the Pahlavi spectacle.

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¹²⁵SAVAK report, 19 September 1967, in *Jashn-i Tajguzari*, 247.

¹²⁶SAVAK report, undated, *ibid.*, 266–67.

¹²⁷SAVAK report, 28 November 1967, *ibid.*, 464. No documents are provided to substantiate this claim.

¹²⁸SAVAK report, 9 November 1967, *ibid.*, 407; SAVAK report, 13 November 1967, *ibid.*, 424–25.

¹²⁹Yazdanpanah to General Mubassir, 8 July 1967, *ibid.*, 111; General Mubassir, "Bakhshnamih," 15 August 1967, *ibid.*, 172–73.

¹³⁰Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641 CE* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012), 233.

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