The power of mujtahid in Iran increased gradually right from the Safavid period. During the Qajar period particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century it reached to the extent that they issued fatwas against the governmental policies. Then the constitutional movement saw a vigorous campaign for the general constitutional reforms on the one hand and the assertion of the constitutional rights of 'ulama' as the sole interpreters of shari'a, on the other hand. Their demand of forming a body of 'ulama' to supervise all legislation in the majlis showed their strong conviction of 'ulama' being the guardians of public matters. Although they were successful in their campaign, the laws pertaining to this effect were not put into practice by the heirs of the Qajars - the Pahlavis. The founder of the Pahlavi dynasty followed secular policies and headed the nation towards modernization. In this process he antagonised the powerful religious establishment in Iran. The Mujtahids or the ruhaniyyun were especially disturbed by the Pahlavi policies regarding religious education and endowments. Moreover, Reza Shah dealt with the religious leaders with strong hands.

Like his father, Mohammad Reza Shah also followed the same policy of westernization and modernization. He tried to woo a section of the clergy which was in favour of non-interference
of clergy in politics. With this end in view, he established contacts with Ayatollah Bourgerdi and other orthodox 'ulama'. But another section of the clergy led by Ayatollah Kashani strongly opposed him mainly on religious ground. The orthodox clergy also demanded strict observation and effective implementation of the role and power of 'ulama' as envisaged in the Constitution. This traditional opposition of a strong section of the clergy can be seen during the nationalist movement of early 1950s. Meanwhile the relatively quietist section of clergy was also dissatisfied towards the end of 1950s with the government's proposal of land and other social reforms. They considered the land reforms as the indication of government's intention of curtailing the power and influence of the religious class. However, some of the 'ulama did not oppose land redistribution as such. However, on social themes such as women's enfranchisement they unitedly opposed the government.

During the 1960s the 'ulama' realized the necessity to bring about reforms in the religious education and institution itself. Ayatollah Motahheri and Ayatollah Taleqani proposed a number of reforms including decentralization of the institution of marja'-e taqlid. Importantly, these reformers seldom talked of social reforms. The crucial issue of women enfrancize was left undiscussed. A few 'ulama' including Motahheri asserted the traditional role of women. These reformers kept a safe distance
from the politics in order to continue their work.

The task of a radical and progressive interpretation of Islam was left for 'Ali Shari'ati, a non-clergy but member of a religious family and well acquainted with religious history. The problem with shari'ati was how to evolve a radical shi'i ideology in order to overthrow the tyrant and despotic regime of the Shah. He took up religious symbols in his lectures and gave them radical interpretations in order to mobilise the people.

'Ali Shari'ati felt that Shi'ism was a 'protestant religion' which always stood against status quo. He also preached that Shi'ism was anti-establishment which had a tradition of fight and martyrdom against injustice and tyranny. He, therefore, criticized the attitude of quietism among the shi'i clergy. He described this attitude as against the teachings of true Shi'ism and a legacy of the Safavid dynasty. He, therefore, termed quietist Shi'ism as Safavid Shi'ism. He emphasised the role of *ijtihad* in order to bring about changes in the understanding and interpretation of religious teachings. However, instead of taking up dogmas and legal teachings of Shi'ism he discussed social and sociological themes. However, he also avoided to speak on concrete social issues such as land reform or women's enfranchize. He, instead, advocated a progressive role for women in the society.
Meanwhile the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini after the death of Ayatollah Borougerdi increased activism among the clergy on the political front. During the late 1960s and early 1970s Khomeini developed the concept of velayat-e faqih in order to bring about a revolution in traditional shi'i thought.

The attitude of the shi'i 'ulama' towards the state and political power had always been a pragmatic one. In principle the shi'i theologians denied the legitimacy of any political authority except the Imams' who are the only ones who hold authority - political or religious. Consequently, all the temporal powers other than Imams' were considered as illegitimate and tyrannical. This theme was developed during the Buyid and the Ilkhanid periods. However, practical necessities led these theologians to evolve certain notions to accommodate the existing power. Therefore, despite the fact that they considered Buyid and Safavid rulers as illegitimate they cooperated with them on the ground of saving the community from disorder and anarchy. The denial of legitimacy also eliminated the possibility of a just government on earth till the last Imam reemerges. The 'ulama', therefore, took the responsibility of guiding the ummat in their own hands. They assumed the role of interpreters of the shari'a. They acted as judges in public disputes and collectors and distributions of religious taxes on behalf of the last Imam. Thus during the medieval period there was a vague
division of responsibilities between the 'ulama' and the rulers. The above mentioned responsibilities were fulfilled by the 'ulama' while the political responsibilities were taken up by the rulers. When during the 18th century - 19th century 'ulama's power increased, the Qajar rulers began to take sanction from them. The usuli movement also strengthened role of 'ulama' in public matters. Meanwhile, there emerged the concept of a'limiyat ('the most learned 'alim) which gave rise to the concept of centralized leadership of the 'ulama'.

The denial of legitimacy to the temporal authorities on the one hand restricted the 'ulama' to take the reigns of government directly in their hands, but on the other hand, it provided them with the legitimacy to oppose tyrant rulers as and when they acted against the shari'a and went against religious interests. It was due to this realization on their part that they opposed the Pahlavi monarchy during the 20th century.

After the Constitutional movement the Iranian clergy took up the position that the constitutional monarchy is the best form of government to safeguard the interest of the community. It was this consideration that although the 'ulama' opposed a particular ruler, but they never declared monarchy as such to be incompatible with Islam. Ayatollah Kashani and even Ayatollah Shari'atmadari till as late as
the end of year 1978 stuck to that position. While Ayatollah Khomeini and Taleqani opposed the monarchy and thought it incompatible with Islam.

It was Ayatollah Khomeini who developed the concept of faqih-e adil, that is, the rule of a 'just alim' over the nation. This concept of Khomeini went against established norms of shi'i thought. He made it possible for a government to exist in the world in the absence of the last Imam. Similarly, he advocated direct participation of 'ulama' in the politics for according to him politics and religion are inseparable and integrated parts of shari'a. In this way Khomeini emerged as a staunch critic of traditional quietism as practized by the Shi'i theologians in the past, and advocated the establishment of Islamic government ruled by 'ulama'. Thus the concept of velayat-e faqih as expounded by Khomeini is unprecedented in the history of Shi'i thought.