

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Constitutional Revolution in Persia – 1906

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The Constitutional Revolution in Persia was the first mass movement of the 20th century in the Islamic world. It brought to the surface all the political and social currents that have shaped Islamic history in the last century—nationalism, pan-Islamism, the role of the *ulema*, international economic penetration, colonialism, foreign intrigue and internal despotism. The Persians waged a valiant battle to preserve their independence in the face of tremendous odds and, through sheer determination, succeeded where most other nations failed.

Towards the end of the 19th century Persia was caught between the claws of the Russian bear and the jaws of the British lion. The Russian armies had devoured the Caucasus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and had made Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia into Russian satellites. Only the independent Islamic territories of the Ottoman Empire and Persia stood in the way of Russian ambitions to reach the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, Britain had consolidated its hold on its Indian Empire and had emerged as the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean. Britain and France had reached an entente with respect to the territories of North Africa. While the Ottomans were recovering from the disastrous war with Russia (1876-1878), and were kept busy with insurrections in Greece and Bulgaria, Britain had moved to tighten its grip on Egypt while France swallowed up Tunisia and Algeria and was moving in on Morocco.

Russia used blatant military power to subdue its neighbors while Britain and France used economic penetration as a means for political control and ultimate colonization. Tunis and Egypt illustrate this observation. The Beys (local rulers) in Tunis borrowed heavily from the French to support their personal lavish life styles (1865-1870). As they got deeper into debt their credit rating dropped, so the interest rates charged for additional loans zoomed up. When the Beys could not make payments on the principal and interest, the Europeans appointed a Public Debt Commission with the power to confiscate revenue. French overseers were appointed in the key ministries of finance and internal affairs. When the Tunisians protested, the French moved in with military force to “maintain order”. Similarly, in Egypt, the Khedives borrowed heavily to finance the Suez Canal and their own extravagance, using Egyptian cotton as collateral. When the price of cotton fell in the world markets, Egypt could not pay its debts. The Europeans forced the Egyptian Public Debt Commission on Cairo and appointed English and French overseers in the departments of finance and internal affairs. An Armenian was hoisted as the prime minister. Khedive Ismail Pasha protested, but to no avail. He was forced out and was replaced by his more compliant son, Tawfiq Pasha. When public outrage at this heavy handedness erupted, and Turabi Pasha channeled it into a nationalist movement, the British sent in their navy, bombarded Alexandria

and occupied Cairo (1882). The pretext, here again, was “to maintain order” so that the economic life of the country was not disturbed and debt collection could proceed smoothly. In effect, it was the death of Egyptian independence. Britain needed Egypt as a key transit point for its Indian Empire and sank its teeth deeper into the Nile valley, crushing a nationalist movement in the Sudan under the Mahdi (1884) and consolidating its hold on Egypt.

At the end of the 19th century, Persia was a poor land ruled by a despotic Shah and exploited by an oppressive ruling class. Nasiruddin Shah (1848-1896), fourth in the Qajar dynasty, ruled with an iron hand. He and his entourage lived in opulence, wasting precious resources on luxuries and ostentatious trips abroad while the vast majority of the people sank into abject poverty. Most people subsisted on agriculture, and land was the primary source of tax revenue. The Shah auctioned off tax collection to the highest bidder. The tax collectors, during their uncertain tenure, bilked the farmers to recover the amounts they had spent bribing the officials to obtain their contracts and compensate themselves for their efforts. The national budget showed a perpetual deficit. There were scant funds to maintain an efficient administration or an effective armed force. To finance his opulent life style, the Shah negotiated loans from English and Russian banks, mortgaging customs duties and hawking trade concessions in return. Resentment grew against the deteriorating conditions of the masses. In these difficult times, only the *ulema* stood between tyranny and justice, articulating the frustrations of the people and standing up for their rights. This they could do because the Persian *ulema* sprang from among the masses and identified with them in their struggles. The Shah and his henchmen resented the independence of the *ulema* and did their best to bend them to the official will, banishing some of them from Persia and subjecting others to untold humiliations. Persia was like a tinderbox; all that was needed was a match to light the fire.

The incident that sparked the Constitutional Revolution was the Tobacco Concession of 1890. That year, Nasiruddin Shah granted a concession to an Englishman, F.G. Talbot, for the production, processing, distribution and sale of all tobacco grown in Persia for a period of 50 years in return for a paltry sum of 15,000 British pounds payable annually to the Persian government. The projected annual net profits of the Company were more than 500,000 pounds so that Persia’s share of these profits was a trivial 3 percent.

The Talbot monopoly would have killed the indigenous tobacco industry. No farmer would be able to sell his product in the open market because a single buyer-the Talbot Tobacco Company-would control all purchases. Competition would die. The tobacco workers, of whom there were over 100,000 in the country, would be at the mercy of the company. Prices would rise and fall at the whims of foreigners who could stimulate production or choke it off to suit their own agendas.

Not to be outdone by the British in controlling the commerce of Persia, Prince Dolgorosky of Russia obtained a first refusal on any railroad project within the country for five years. A series of other concessions to foreigners followed. In 1891, Baron Julius de Reuter of England obtained exclusive privileges to issue bank notes and to exploit mineral resources. Shortly thereafter the Shah sold a lottery syndicate to a British company for 40,000 pounds claiming that the proceeds would be used to further education. These concessions, if implemented, would tighten the stranglehold of Russia and Britain on the economic life of the country. Was the example of Tunis and Egypt to repeat itself in Persia?

Resentment kept building up against the arbitrary rule of the Shah and the manner in which he was selling out his country to foreigners. Two of the towering personages of the age who articulated this resentment and became prime movers in the events that followed were Seyyed Jamaluddin Afghani, a pan-Islamic activist, and Shaykh Hassan Tabrizi, a noted Persian scholar.

Seyyed Jamaluddin Afghani was undoubtedly one of the most influential Muslims of the era. Some consider him to be the principal figure in awakening Islamic political sentiments in Persia, Afghanistan, India, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. Others criticize his role in the destruction of Islamic institutions, including the Sultanate of Persia and the Ottoman Caliphate and suspect that he was working in collusion with one European power or the other. The verdict of history on whether he was a patriot or a turncoat is not clear. It is easier to make a case that while he fervently believed in his grand pan-Islamic vision, he was caught in the whirlwinds of the times like so many Muslims of that era and became a partner in the demise of political institutions that had provided stability to the Islamic world for 500 years.

Seyyed Jamaluddin was born in 1838 at Asadabad near the Afghan-Persian border. He was called a Seyyed because his family claimed descent from the family of the Prophet through Imam Hussain. The title of "Afghani" refers to his Afghan-Persian heritage. As a youth, Seyyed Jamaluddin studied the Qur'an, *Fiqh*, Arabic grammar, philosophy, tasawwuf, logic, mathematics, and medicine, disciplines that were the backbone of an Islamic curriculum at that time. In 1856, at the age of eighteen, he spent a year in India and felt the rising pulse of the subcontinent, which was soon to erupt in the Sepoy Uprising of 1857. From India, Seyyed Jamaluddin visited Arabia where he performed his Hajj. Returning to Afghanistan in 1858, he was employed by Amir Dost Muhammed. His talents propelled him to the forefront of the Afghan hierarchy. When Dost Muhammed died and his brother Mohammed Azam became the emir, Jamaluddin was appointed the prime minister.

In 1869, Seyyed Jamaluddin fell out of favor with the emir and left Kabul for India. In Delhi, he received the red carpet treatment from British officials, who were at the same time careful not to let him meet the principal Indian Muslim leaders. That same year he visited Cairo on his way to Istanbul where his fame had preceded him and he was elected to the Turkish Academy. However, his "rational" interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet was deeply suspect in the eyes of the Turkish *ulema* and he was expelled from Istanbul in 1871.

Back in Cairo, Jamaluddin had a major role in the events that led to the overthrow of Khedive Ismail Pasha who had brought Egypt to its knees through his extravagance. European influence increased, and Jamaluddin was at the head of the Young Egyptian Movement and the nationalist uprising under Torabi Pasha (1881) that sought to expel the Europeans from Egypt. The British, suspicious of his motives, sent him back to India just before their occupation of Cairo in 1882.

From India, Seyyed Jamaluddin embarked on a journey through Europe and resided for various lengths of time in London, Paris and St. Petersburg. In Paris he met and influenced the Egyptian modernist Muhammed Abduh. Together, the two started a political organization *Urwah al Wuthqa* (The Unbreakable Bond) whose avowed purpose was to "modernize" Islam and protect the Islamic world from the greed of foreigners. Its strident anti-European tone annoyed the British who engineered to have the organization and its mouthpiece, the Minaret, shut down.

In 1889 Sultan Nasiruddin Shah of Persia visited St. Petersburg and invited Jamaluddin to return to Tehran, promising him the post of prime minister. A reluctant Jamaluddin saw an opportunity to influence events in the Islamic heartland and returned, soon to find himself out of favor with the monarch. Fearing the wrath of the Shah, Jamaluddin took refuge in the Shrine of Shah Abdul Azeem and from the sanctuary, denounced the Shah as a tyrant and advocated his overthrow. It was while he stayed in the sanctuary that Jamaluddin met and influenced the principal figures who had a major impact on the subsequent turbulent events in Persia, including the assassination of Nasiruddin Shah.

The Shah, furious at Seyyed Jamaluddin's tirades, banished him from Persia in 1891. The Seyyed arrived in Istanbul and was warmly received by Sultan Abdul Hamid II who nonetheless kept a close watch on his activities. Jamaluddin Afghani spent the rest of his life in Istanbul and died of cancer in 1896.

Two principal themes run through the life and work of Seyyed Jamaluddin Afghani. First, his proclaimed goal was to unite the Islamic world under a single caliph resident in Istanbul. Towards this end, he sought a rapprochement between the Ottoman Empire and Persia, working to have the Shah recognize the Ottoman Sultan as the Caliph of all Muslims, while the Caliph recognized the Shah as the sovereign of all Shi'as. He wrote to the leading theologians of Karbala, Tabriz and Tehran, passionately arguing his case and was partially successful in bringing them to his point of view. However, the rapprochement did not take place due to the political turbulence in Persia. Second, he sought to "modernize" Islam to make it responsive, as he saw it, to the needs of the age. The movement that he started, which was spread by his disciple, Muhammed Abduh of Egypt, was called the *salafi* movement. It derives from the word "*as salaf as salehin*" (the pious ancestors) and refers to the legal opinions advanced by the first three generations after the Prophet. It was essentially a rationalist and apologist movement, which sought to bring about a *nahda* (renaissance) of Islamic thought. Muhammed Abduh sought to replace the four schools of Sunnah Fiqh (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali) with a single Fiqh. He taught that the laws of the Qur'an could be "rationalized" and if necessary, reinterpreted. The Salafi movement had a major impact on Arab intellectual circles around the turn of the 20th century and also influenced the Aligarh movement in India as well as the Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia. The movement, however, had no roots either in Islamic traditions or Islamic history. The *nahda* was suspected of attempting to secularize Islam, just as the renaissance of the 16th century had secularized the Latin West. As a mass movement, the Salafi movement was a failure and was rejected by the Islamic world.

Returning to events in Persia, the Tobacco Concession of 1889 roused a public outcry. When the Talbot Tobacco Company started its operations in 1891 riots broke out in the major cities. The disturbances in Tabriz were particularly intense. An alarmed Shah invited the Russians to intervene and bring order to Tabriz but the Russians refused.

At this juncture Jamaluddin Afghani saw a golden opportunity to engineer the overthrow of the hated Shah. From Istanbul, he wrote to the leading *ulema* in Persia, including Hajji Mirza Abul Kasim of Karbala, Hajji Mirza Muhammed Hassan of Shiraz, Hajji Shaykh Muhammed Taqi of Isfahan and Hajji Mirza Jawad of Tabriz. He emphasized to them the dangers facing the Islamic world from European intrigue. He pointed out how economic penetration had resulted in the enslavement of Egypt and Tunis, and if the Persians did not resist the tyrant Shah, the same fate awaited them too. He underscored the need for independent *ulema* who alone could serve as the backbone of resistance to the European onslaught. He pointed out how the destruction of the power of the *ulema* in India and Central Asia had led to the colonization of those lands while Afghanistan was saved from the same fate by the vigilance of the *ulema*. The Shah, wrote Jamaluddin in his letters, had forced many of the *ulema* to flee the land of their birth along with thousands of patriotic Persians. In short, he roused the religious and patriotic fervor of the clerics to take a stand against the Tobacco Concession and to reign in the Shah.

Jamaluddin Afghani's letters had their desired effect. The *ulema* were stirred into action. The subsequent events gave a stunning display of their power and the role of religion in the politics of Persia. These events were a forerunner of the upheavals that accompanied the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the Iranian Revolution of 1978.

It is not generally known that the first effective application of non-violent methods in modern times to achieve social and political goals was in Persia under the *ulema* and not in India under Gandhi or in the United States under Martin Luther King. It was the Muslims of Persia who showed in 1890 that nonviolent civil disobedience was a powerful weapon in combating injustice and tyranny.

Moved by the eloquence of Jamaluddin Afghani, Hajji Mirza Hassan Shirazi wrote to the Shah that the sellout of the tobacco industry was against the interests of the people and contrary to the injunctions of the Qur'an. When it did not elicit a satisfactory response, the learned cleric gave a *fatwa* that under the circumstances, the consumption of tobacco was haram (forbidden). He enjoined the people to abstain from tobacco. This was the first instance of peaceful disobedience in modern times and it was a political masterstroke. The tobacco boycott was a stunning success. Habitual smokers gave up smoking. Merchants closed their shops. Pipes were set aside. The poor as well as the rich obeyed the command of the learned Hajji Mirza.

The successful boycott thrust the religious leadership into the forefront of the national struggle, a role that has continued to this day. The peaceful Islamic spirit of the Persian people never shone so brightly as it did in that hour. It was a convincing demonstration of the positive role of religion in the national struggle against foreign domination. The people showed discipline and cohesion and affirmed their solidarity with their spiritual leaders. They demonstrated that there were limits to their toleration of injustice, whether it was forced upon them from within or imposed from abroad.

The boycott had its desired effect. The shares of the Imperial (British) Bank, which had financed the Talbot Tobacco Company, fell by 50%. Faced with the overwhelming will of the people, the Shah relented and withdrew the Tobacco Concession (1892). The Persian government agreed to compensate the Talbot Company a sum of 500,000 British pounds. The prestige of Britain suffered while that of Russia, which had refused to intervene in the turmoil, went up.

Sultan Nasiruddin Shah did not survive the aftermath of the Tobacco Concession for long. A zealot, Mirza Muhammed Riza of Kirman, who had been influenced by the ideas of Jamaluddin Afghani, assassinated the Shah in 1896. Mirza Muhammed was captured, tortured and executed.

The new Sultan Muzaffaruddin Shah was a man of weak health and still weaker resolution. He was no less inclined than his father to a life of luxury. He too sought loans from European bankers at exorbitant interest rates to finance his life style. Ultimately, his rule also foundered on the rock of foreign loans.

Immediately upon his accession, Muzaffaruddin Shah planned an ostentatious state visit to Europe. As the country teetered on the verge of bankruptcy and there was no money in the treasury, the Shah floated a loan of one million British pounds in London. The credit rating of Persia was so poor that the loan was not subscribed to and the Shah had to abandon the planned trip. Determined to raise funds for a future trip, he turned his attention to fleecing his own subjects.

The Russians stepped in where the British had stumbled. They offered the Shah a loan of 20 million Russian rubles at 5% interest repayable in 75 years. The cash-hungry Shah gladly accepted the loan and set off on his European tour, visiting among other places, Paris, St. Petersburg and Istanbul. The British, showing their pique at the Russian loan, snubbed the Shah and he was unable to visit London. By the time he returned from his grand tour, the Shah had consumed 11 million of the 20 million rubles. Of this amount, a sum of 4 million rubles (500,000 British pounds) was used to pay off the loan from the Imperial Bank, which had been used in 1891 to indemnify the Imperial Tobacco Company. Only 4 million rubles remained which he used to tighten his grip on the increasingly restless population.

In return for the loan, the Shah mortgaged the customs taxes from all the northern frontiers of Persia. Unable to find reliable henchmen who would collect and forward to him the customs taxes, he hired Belgian tax collectors to do the dirty work. The Belgians behaved like imperial lords, imposing high tariffs and treating the Persians with contempt.

Flush with their victory in penetrating the Persian court through their loan, the Russians moved to increase their influence. They inaugurated a subsidized shipping line between the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf, ostensibly to increase trade but in reality to augment their presence in the Gulf and become a player in the rivalry between the Ottomans and the British for control of Kuwait and Bahrain.

The Shah had, in effect, mortgaged the future of his country to finance his grand tours and his opulence. Strapped for cash, he approached the Czar once again for a second loan. A second loan of 10 million rubles was granted in 1902 but this time the loan came with strings attached. The Shah was required to accept Belgian oversight (Belgium was allied with Russia) over all the financial operations in Persia. The Belgians spread out into every single branch of the government, making their imperial presence felt. Not a ruble could be spent nor one collected without their knowledge and consent.

Britain had kept a close watch on the increasing influence of Russia. The Boer War in South Africa had temporarily distracted her. Having successfully concluded that war, Britain reasserted its position in Persia and the Gulf. Its strategic interest was to guard the sea-lanes and land routes leading to its Indian Empire and it perceived that threats to this strategic interest could emerge from Russia, Germany or the Ottomans. The British position was stated in the Monroe doctrine of 1903. It asserted that the right to establish railroads or railroad terminals in the Gulf was the exclusive privilege of Britain and any attempt on the part of another power to do so would be resisted by force of arms. This was a clear warning to the Russians and to the Germans who were negotiating with the Ottomans to build a railroad through Iraq to Kuwait.

Events in Russia provided momentum to the protests in Persia. The Russian-Japanese war (1904-1905) over control of Manchuria and Korea ended in a complete victory for Japan and the surrender of Russian forces. The war demonstrated that the armies of the Czar were not invincible and could be beaten by an Asian power. In response to the defeat and as an expression of other grievances, there were popular demonstrations in St. Petersburg. The Czar was forced to create an Imperial Duma (Russian Parliament) and to institute reforms and share some of his imperial powers with the people.

The defeat of the Czar's armies and the creation of the Imperial Duma encouraged the Persians. The *ulema* of Tabriz, Karbala and Najaf wrote to the Shah advising him to rescind the concessions. The reply was vague, so the *ulema* declared that they were asking Sultan Abdul Hamid of the Ottomans, as Caliph of Islam, to take Persia under his protection. In Tehran, the protests culminated in the mass migration of the *ulema* to the sanctuary of Shah Abdul Azeem in December 1905. The townsfolk, workers, merchants and bureaucrats followed suit. The throngs swelled to more than 20,000 people. This was the Persian equivalent of a peaceful "sit-in" to show the Shah that the people had had enough and would not tolerate oppression any more. Threats from the Shah and his prime minister proved fruitless and the Shah had to cave in. Under his own signature he wrote to the *ulema* promising reforms, the removal of the corrupt officials and the constitution of a Majlis e Adalat (Court of Justice).

The Shah did not keep his promises. Restlessness grew with each passing month and protests broke out again in June 1906. The shops were shuttered and a large number of people took refuge in the Juma' Masjid where the *ulema* denounced the Shah and his henchman. More migrations from the capital to other shrines followed until the capital city looked like a ghost town. The governor tried coercion by locking up the shops of merchants participating in the hitherto peaceful protests but this method did not

work. In desperation, he surrounded the Juma' Masjid and ordered its occupants out. The order was refused; a fight took place, in which one of the clerics died. The burial procession for the dead cleric attracted thousands of mourners. The Shah's troops dispersed the mourners killing scores of people.

The *ulema*, witnessing the violent methods of the authorities, agreed to vacate the Juma' Masjid and to move south, to the city of Qum. Multitudes deserted Tehran and marched out with the *ulema*. The governor, seeing that the shops were still closed, ordered them opened and threatened that if his orders were not obeyed, he would command his soldiers to loot them. Determined to continue their non-violent protests, some of the *ulema* sought refuge in the British Embassy. The Embassy granted permission and soon the number of refugees there swelled to 15,000.

The Shah was checkmated. He could not force an evacuation from the British embassy. The protests had engulfed the entire nation. He dismissed the unpopular governor of Tehran and wrote a letter under his signature promising to punish those responsible for the repression. By now the people had lost faith in the promises of the Shah. They demanded constitutional reform and the formation of a *Majlis* with legislative authority. The demands included that the *Majlis* be composed of 200 members elected by eligible males between the ages of thirty and seventy. The Shah was in failing health and his resolve flickered. In September 1906 he accepted all of these demands.

A committee was immediately constituted to draft the electoral laws. The committee worked overtime and within thirty days submitted a draft to the Shah for his signature. The draft envisaged a total of 156 members for the *Majlis*, 60 to be elected from Tehran and the remainder from the provinces. Members were to be elected for a term of two years. Direct elections were prescribed for Tehran and indirect elections were proposed for the provinces. The Shah approved the draft and the *Majlis* was born.

Within a month, the *Majlis* members from Tehran were elected and went to work. The electoral law had made a provision, on an interim basis, for the Tehran delegates to commence work even before the arrival of delegates from the provinces. This was done to prevent the Shah from sabotaging the *Majlis* even before it started its work. Two of the important issues facing the nation were the drafting of the Fundamental Laws and the financial crisis. By November 1906 the *Majlis* prepared a draft for the Fundamental Laws. The religion of the state was to be Islam and the Ithna Ashari Fiqh, the governing school of jurisprudence. The lives and properties of all citizens and all foreign subjects were guaranteed. The people of Persia were guaranteed equal rights and due process before the law. The Qajar dynasty was accorded sovereignty as a trust conferred by the Divine. The *Majlis* was given "the right in all questions to propose any measure, which it regards as conducive to the well being of the government and the people, after due discussion and deliberation thereof in all sincerity and truth". Five members of the *Majlis* were to be from the *ulema*, who had the privilege of screening legislation to ensure its compliance with Islam. Local government was slated to be in the hands of elected *anjumans* (provincial assemblies and municipal councils).

To solve the financial crisis facing the country and to extricate it from foreign control, the *Majlis* proposed the creation of a national bank with a capital of 6 million tumans, so that the authority to create credit and to manage the inflow and outflow of capital from the country, rested with Persians. The foreign banks, controlled by Britain and Russia, had on more than one occasion demonstrated their stranglehold on the financial affairs of the country. In 1906, in response to an increase in the international price of silver, large amounts of Persian tumans were smuggled into British India, where they were melted down into Indian rupee coins, which had smaller silver content. When silver coins became scarce, the Imperial Bank, controlled by Britain, flooded the Persian market with paper currency. Inflation rose, compounding the financial problems of Persia. The *Majlis* was aware of the critical role that finance played in foreign control and its members were conscious of the fate of Egypt, which had

fallen prey to foreign financial interests. The Majlis members and the ulema made a fervent appeal to the people for subscriptions to the new bank. The response was overwhelming. Rich and poor alike came forward with subscriptions. But this project was not successful due to the determined opposition of both Britain and Russia. The foreign banks withheld credit and made paper money scarce, choking off commerce and contributions alike. As a result the financial strings of Persia remained in foreign hands.

Under prodding of the *ulema*, Sultan Muzaffaruddin Shah signed the constitution from his deathbed on the last of 1906. He died a week later and was succeeded by his son Muhammed Ali Mirza who was even more averse to the controls imposed on him by the constitution than was his father. He snubbed the leaders of the Majlis and did not even invite them to his coronation. The provincial governors continued to hamper the progress of the elections. A frustrated populace protested and riots broke out in Shiraz, Tabriz, Kirmanshah, Maku and Fars.

The principal concern of the new Shah, like that of his father, was to raise loans to finance his lavish lifestyle. A new loan of 400,000 British pounds, to be underwritten jointly by Britain and Russia, was in the negotiation phase. The *Majlis* acted swiftly and decisively to block it and to forbid any fresh loans without its consent. It passed a resolution that the annual expenditures of the Shah were subject to approval by the Majlis and that he should be held to the allotted budget. It also demanded that the detested Belgians who had been imported to oversee the finances of the country be dismissed forthwith.

Faced with popular unrest and countrywide demonstrations, Muhammed Ali Shah fired the Belgians but bid his time to throttle the *Majlis*. He invited Mirza Ali Asghar Khan, who had served as prime minister during his father's reign (1901-1903) but who had been forced out of the country by popular demand because of his repressive methods, to return and assume the position of prime minister. Mirza Ali was a wily politician who had served his old master, the previous Shah well and was opposed to the constitutional reforms. The Majlis, in a gesture of goodwill, allowed him to return to Persia from Europe after declaring verbally that he supported the constitution. The Shah promptly appointed him prime minister and Mirza Ali set out, step by step, to destroy the Majlis.

The principal figure in the plot to derail the reforms was a cleric, Shaykh Fazlullahi Nuri. He was hired by the Shah's agents to cast suspicion on some of the *Majlis* members. Shaykh Fazlullahi was one of the clerics elected to the Majlis, but he resigned his post and retired to the sanctuary of Shah Abdul Azeem on the outskirts of Tehran from where he denounced his former colleagues as atheists. The shaykh then conspired to forge certain documents to prove that certain members of the anjumans in Azerbaijan had used blasphemous expressions against the Prophet.

The Shaykh's agents were successful in fomenting riots in Tabriz and Kirman, providing a pretext for intervention by the Shah and his foreign sponsors. Neither the Czar of Russia nor Sultan Abdul Hamid of the Ottomans was happy with the constitutional reforms in Persia, which they feared would spill over into their own countries. There was also a deep suspicion in Istanbul that the reforms were engineered from outside to destroy traditional institutions in the Islamic world, making it easier for the European powers to destabilize and ultimately occupy the Muslim heartland.

In July 1907 the Ottomans sent in troops to occupy border areas in Kurdistan, presumably to quell disturbances there, but in reality to put pressure on the *Majlis*. Meanwhile, the Czar sent a stern note to the Shah saying that Russia could not indefinitely tolerate disturbances on her borders. Britain, which had up until that time pretended to be a friend of the Constitutional Revolution, made an about face and advised the Persians to listen to and accommodate the Russians.

The problems facing the *Majlis* continued to mount. Military and diplomatic pressures from Russia and the Ottomans increased. The treasury was empty and there were no funds to pay the troops. The *Majlis* was vehemently opposed to any fresh loans from Russia or Britain. The prime minister, who was one of the Shah's men, persisted in his efforts to obtain a loan from the Russians, a move so unpopular that he was shot dead by a zealot, Abbas Aqa. So great was the antipathy towards foreign domination that the body of the assassin Abbas Aqa received a mass funeral worthy of a national hero. Celebrations were held on the fortieth day after his burial and orators compared him to those who died with Imam Hussain at the historic Battle of Karbala.

The international scene grew more ominous as Britain and Russia agreed to partition Persia and signed the Anglo-Russian Agreement. The Agreement divided Persia into three zones. The northern and by far the largest and most populous zone, extending from Azerbaijan to the Afghan border, was allocated to Russia. The southern zone, adjoining Baluchistan and straddling the entrance to the Persian Gulf was allotted to the British. A central zone, separating the Russians and the British, was left for the Persians to govern. Russia saw the advantages of an entente with Britain on the Persian question, since it was turning its attention to the Far East and its rivalry with the empire of Japan for control of Manchuria. So it was in 1908 that Russia and Britain reached the same kind of understanding with respect to Persia, as had France and Britain with respect to North Africa and Egypt in the 1870s.

The proposed partition of Persia was the culmination of a developing entente between the principal European powers in the latter half of the 19th century. After the Napoleonic wars Britain realized that there was more to be gained by working with rather than against its principal rival France in the Great Game of world colonization. Diplomacy was a cheaper way to achieve its goals than war. An understanding gradually developed between the two powers whereby England accepted French domination over Algeria, Tunis and Morocco, while France acquiesced in British domination over Egypt. Russia was a latecomer to this game. It faced a major obstacle in the Ottoman and Persian Empires in its desires to reach the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

It was in the joint interest of Britain and France to keep the Russians out while they consolidated their hold on North Africa and Egypt. Hence, they intervened on behalf of the Ottomans in the Crimean War (1854-1856) to ensure that Russia did not dominate the Ottoman Empire. After the emergence of a unified Germany under Bismarck, Russia too was convinced that its interests lay in cooperation with Britain and France to contain Germany and win its share of the spoils as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated.

After the Russian-Ottoman war of 1876-1878, England sided with Russia in ensuring that the Czar got his share in the eastern Ottoman provinces of Armenia and Azerbaijan and his domination of Romania and Bulgaria was confirmed. Towards the end of the 19th century, the evolving entente extended to include British and Russian understanding over Persia. The collusion of Britain, France and Russia to divide up the Ottoman Empire and Persia bound the Entente Powers in the Great Game and it explains why they fought as a unit against the encroachments of Austria-Hungary and Germany in the First World War.

Despite the avowed denials from London and St. Petersburg, the Anglo-Russian Agreement for the partition of Persia could be read like an open book. The Persian masses and scholars alike were alert to the impending calamity. Only the Shah seemed oblivious to the future of his country but since he was the one who had mortgaged his country for a pittance, his only recourse was to hang on to power no matter what the cost.

The assassination of Prime Minister Abbas Aqa had thrown the political landscape into turmoil. The next prime minister, a protégé of the Shah, lasted but a few weeks while protests and sit-ins multiplied in the provincial towns. The Shah, while swearing by the Qur'an in public that he was faithful to the constitution, secretly planned a coup against the *Majlis*. To finance his planned operations, he raised a loan from the Russian Bank, mortgaging crown jewels and hawking jewelry belonging to the queen.

The Shah made his move on December 15, 1907 and sent a battalion of Cossack troops to surround the *Majlis* building. His selected goons mounted rooftops around the building to intimidate anyone who dared oppose the Cossacks. Some hired mullahs blared their denunciation of the *Majlis*, calling its members unbelievers and blasphemers. The *Majlis*, caught off-guard, offered no resistance. But as news of the planned coup spread, Persia exploded in protest. In Tehran, the merchants shuttered their shops. Commerce came to a halt. Armed guards belonging to the various political parties came out to oppose the Cossacks. Telegrams were sent from the provincial capitals calling for the ouster of the Shah. Tabriz sent an armed detachment of 1,000 horsemen. Faced with this avalanche, the Shah called the Cossacks back, swore on the Qur'an that he would abide by the constitution and the first standoff between the *Majlis* and the sovereign ended in a stalemate.

This was however a temporary truce and tensions between the two sides continued to mount. Each side blamed the other for acts of violence, which increased day by day. The situation was volatile enough as it was but the intervention of Russia and Britain at this juncture added fuel to the fire.

On June 2, 1908, a joint delegation of Russian and British ambassadors met the Persian foreign minister and threatened that Russia would intervene militarily unless the threats against the Shah ceased forthwith. The next day, under cover of panic created in the capital by Russian agents and paid hirelings, the Shah fled from his palace to the King's Gardens located outside the city, under a Russian armed escort. On June 4, he invited some of the notables of the *Majlis* to meet with him and discuss matters of mutual concern. Upon their arrival, the treacherous Shah ordered the Cossacks to arrest them. On June 7, the Shah declared martial law and put a Russian, Colonel Liakhoff, in charge of maintaining order in the capital. He sent a message to the *Majlis* demanding the shutting down of the free press and the expulsion from the capital of the political leaders and the editors of major newspapers.

These demands were impossible to meet and as negotiations continued, the Shah ordered the movement of more arms and ammunition from the city to the King's Gardens. On June 23, a brigade of Cossack horsemen, under command of Liakhoff and his Russian staff, entered the courtyard around which were located the *Majlis* building and an adjoining mosque. The deputies were locked up in the *Majlis* building. Liakhoff ordered the placement of heavy guns at strategic locations around the courtyard and started a bombardment, which soon reduced the *Majlis* building and the mosque to rubble. A large number of deputies and several defending youth, were slain. Those who were not killed, or who could not escape, were taken prisoner and hauled away, chains around their necks. Some of the deputies sought refuge in the British embassy but were refused entry. Others, like Hajji Mirza Ibrahim, were shot while resisting attempts by the soldiers to strip them naked in public. Some were hauled off to the King's Gardens and strangled. Included among those killed on that fateful day were the great orators Aqa Seyyed Jamaluddin and the Malikul Mutakkallimun, both from Isfahan, who were the backbone of the mass movement that had organized schools and social services in Tehran and the provincial capitals.

The Shah promoted Colonel Liakhoff to be the martial law officer for Tehran. Determined, cold blooded and ruthless, Liakhoff let loose a reign of terror in the capital. Houses belonging to deputies, their relatives and sympathizers were looted and hundreds were killed in cold blood. Tehran turned into a city under occupation and witnessed the dance of death and destruction for several days.

News of the reign of terror in Tehran reached the provinces and a national resistance movement began. Tabriz, the second largest city in Persia, was in the vanguard of this movement. The Constitutionalists, under the leadership of one Sattar Khan, occupied the administrative headquarters and declared that they no longer recognized the Shah. The surrounding villages joined the uprising so that Tabriz, in essence, became a city-state, opposed to the Shah and run by the constitutionalists.

In response, the Shah unleashed the notorious *Shahseven* tribe upon Tabriz. The unruly men of this tribe were known for their love of plunder and loot. They attacked the villages around the city, killing the men, abusing the women, looting their belongings and were successful in cutting off all roads into and out of the city. The Constitutionalists garrisoned the town and stopped the advance of the Shahsevens. As the siege of Tabriz progressed, and food supplies in the city became scarce, the Shah, to put additional pressure on the Constitutionalists and force Tabriz into submission, dispatched contingents of Silakhuri and Cossack troops under the command of Russian officers. Undaunted, the city held on, the Silakhuri troops were beaten back, the Cossack advance was brought to a standstill; the siege dragged on for months.

More ominous were the moves of the Russian army to the north. The Czar was no lover of constitutional reforms. The recent success of the Young Turks in Istanbul in forcing Sultan Abdul Hamid II to reinstate the Ottoman constitution (1908) had given the Czar additional cause for concern. But the Russians also knew that any foreign intervention in Persia would meet with mass opposition. The Czar therefore chose a cautious approach, acting with Britain to ensure the protection of European property, but otherwise staying clear of the civil war between the Shah and the Constitutionalists. A British gunboat appeared off the Persian Gulf port of Bandar Abbas to show the flag, while a column of Russian troops entered Azerbaijan and marched to Tabriz without opposition either from the constitutionalists or the Shah's forces. The siege of Tabriz was lifted, food supplies were brought in, the *Shahsevens* were dispersed and the city resumed a semblance of normalcy.

The fall of Tabriz did not mean the end of the uprising. In Isfahan to the south, and Rasht to the north, new armies arose under the leadership of the Bakhtiari dervishes. The Bakhtiaris were a Sufi order and had fought through the centuries on the side of justice and fair play in the many feuds and wars that had raged in Persia. They were resolute warriors, tough, resilient, like their brethren Naqshbandis in the Caucasus and the Jazuliyas in far-away West Africa. The southern armies from Isfahan were under the proven and capable leadership of Sardar e Asad and Shamsam us Sultan. The northern armies from Rasht were under the command of the equally capable Nasrus Sultana Muhammed Wali Khan. Both armies, after overcoming local resistance from the Shah's forces, were poised to march on Tehran.

The mobilization of Bakhtiari dervishes set off alarm signals in London and St. Petersburg. Hoping to preserve a semblance of power for the Shah, they advised him to accommodate the nationalists and reinstate the *Majlis*, if only to buy time. But the Shah remained stubborn and noncommittal. The Czar sent a blunt warning to the Nationalists that unless the northern armies stopped their march, the Russian army might intervene. A contingent of Russian troops did land at Anzali on their way to Tehran. But this saber rattling failed to impress the Bakhtiari. The northern armies moved on Qizwin, on the approaches to Tehran, while the southern armies advanced upon Qum, the spiritual capital of Persia. On June 12, 1909, advanced columns of the Bakhtiari troops entered Tehran. Resistance from the Cossack brigade was heavy but after several days fighting, the Cossacks surrendered and the Shah took refuge in the Russian embassy. There was jubilation in the capital. The leaders of the conquering armies met on July 16, 1909 with the ulema and the available members of the *Majlis* and deposed Muhammed Ali Shah. His young son, Ahmed Mirza was placed on the throne as Sultan Ahmed Shah.

Thus ended the Constitutional Revolution that began with the Tobacco Concession of 1891, and after a struggle lasting 18 years, succeeded in eliminating the tyranny of the Shah. It brought the rule of law to Persia where previously there was rule by dictate. It succeeded in preserving the independence and territorial integrity of Persia in the face of the avowed intent of Britain and Russia to partition and occupy the land. It awakened the latent nationalism of the Persians and it presaged the nationalist movement of Mosaddegh in 1954. And it propelled the *ulema* to the forefront of the national struggle, an element that was to show itself with volcanic power in the Iranian Revolution of 1978.

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