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## CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION OF IRAN (1905-1911) AND THE ROLE OF CLERGY: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905-1911) during the rule of Qajar dynasty was a significant event in the history of West Asia as for the first time people of the region stood for their political rights and demanded curbs on the rule of absolute monarchy. The revolution resulted in the promulgation of a new Constitution and the establishment of the parliament (Majlis). However the success of the revolution could not last long as it ended up abruptly in 1911.*

*The paper has highlighted the causes of the constitutional revolution as well as the circumstances which led to its failure despite being popular among the large section of society. The role of Shia clergy has also been discussed because they were the first ones who demanded reform in the monarchical system of the country and led the popular mobilization against the Qajar Shah. The dominant external powers in Iran at that time i.e Britain and Russia had left no stone unturned to thwart the success of the constitutional revolution hence their role have also been discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a constitutional regime in Iran or Persia was the chief objective of the Revolution of 1905-11. Like any other major revolution, the Constitutional Revolution in Iran encompassed a broad spectrum of ideas and objectives, reflecting diverse intellectual trends, social backgrounds, and political demands. At the time even the text of the Constitution itself did not have universal support. Yet, in spite of ideological ambiguities, the Revolution remains an epoch-making episode in the modern history of Iran because of its political achievements and its enduring social and cultural consequences. As a modern revolution, it was Laimed at dislodging the old order by means of popular action and by advocacy of the tenets of liberalism, limited government, and nationalism. For the first time in the course of modern Iranian history, the revolutionaries sought to replace arbitrary power with law, representative government, and social justice and to resist the encroachment of imperial powers with conscious nationalism, popular activism, and economic independence. Constitutionalists



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sought to reduce the power of the tribal and urban notables. The greater sense of nationhood that emerged out of the Revolution has remained essential to the modern Iranian identity.

## **CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO THE REVOLUTION**

When Naser-ud-Din Shah, the Qajar king was assassinated by Mirza Reza Kermani in 1896, the crown passed to his son Mozaffer-ud-Din, who was a weak and ineffectual ruler. Royal extravagance and the absence of incoming revenues exacerbated financial problems. The Shah quickly spent two large loans from Russia, partly on trips to Europe. Public anger fed on the Shah's propensity for granting concessions to European in return for generous payments to him and his officials.

Concessions to foreign nations and invasion of foreign goods gradually integrated Iran's local and regional markets into the world markets. This integration had far-reaching consequences. Although increasing the volume of foreign trade, it contributed to chronic problems: an unfavorable balance of payments, high inflation, increased bankruptcy among merchants and economic depression in certain areas of the country. The problems and concerns of the merchants became national in scope. They became the first group to challenge the Qajars, demanding protection against foreign intrusion and imposition of laws to regulate commerce. The Qajars' failure to satisfy the merchants made them more belligerent.

The merchants could not seriously challenge the Shah; they sought and received the critical support of the clergy on the Ulema, their traditional allies.

Western penetration in many ways adversely affected the fortunes of the Ulema, it increased their political clout. Some of the Ulema became opponents of Western imperialism and a component of the rising Persian nationalism. Alone they did not have the resources to oppose the Great Powers and the Qajar Kings, but together with the merchants they became a force to be reckoned with.

In June 1906, Sayyed Abdallah Behbehani and Sayyed Mohammed Tabatabai – two of Tehran's three most respected Mojtaahids (senior cleric) – led a procession of some thousand seminary students to the sanctuary of Qom. At Qom, the two were joined by Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, the other senior Mojtaahid. The three threatened to move en mass to Karbala and Najaf,

(two of Shia Islam holiest sites in Iraq), and thus deprive the country of religious services unless the Shah, besides fulfilling other demands, established and “Adalat Khaneh “ (House of Justice), the most important of all demands.

The Ulema’s demand for the House of Justice, soon turned into the most radical demand with the support from merchants and secular intelligentsia, the demand for a written constitution drafted by an elected National Assembly ( Majli-e-Melli ) .

At first the Shah dismissed the protestors as “Bahai heretics” and “British hired traitor” because protestors mainly from ‘bazaar’ and of secular outlooks, gathered at the residence of the British Legation at Northern Tehran, where the very idea of elected National Assembly had seen evolved.

The Shah faced with an ongoing general strike, a barrage of telegrams from the provinces, threats of armed intervention by emigrant communities in Baku and Tiflis and importantly the threat of defection from his Russian trained army i.e. the COSSACKS, he eventually backed down.

On August 5, 1906 – Mozaffar al-Din Shah signed the royal proclamation to hold nationwide elections for a Constituent Assembly. Five days before his natural death on December 30, 1906, he signed Iran’s first written constitution.

## **SHI’ISM IN THE CONSTITUTION**

The constitution of 1906 stated explicitly that the Shah’s sovereignty derived from the people, as a power given to him by trust; not as a right bestowed directly by God. But the power of the Ulema and of Shiism as the dominant faith of the country was also confirmed in the constitution. Shi’ism was declared to be the state religion, Shari’a law was recognized, clerical courts were given a significant role, and there was to be a five man committee of senior Ulema to scrutinize legislation passed by the Majlis, to confirm its spiritual legitimacy; until the Hidden Imam ( Last of 12 Shia Imams, whom Shia Muslims believe will return before the Day of Judgment, to restore justice and peace on the earth) – whose proper responsibility this was – should reappear.

Mozaffar ud-Din Shah's successor, his son Mohammad Ali Shah, had more autocratic instincts than his father. He resolved from the start, although he took an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, to overturn it and restore the previous form of untrammled monarchy, with Russian help.

## **DIVISION AMONG THE CLERGY**

Through 1907 and the first half of 1908 the Majlis passed measures for the reform of taxation and finance, education and judicial matters. The last were particularly disturbing to the Ulema, because they saw their traditional role encroached upon. Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri was prominent among the Ulema who changed their minds at this time. He had supported the protests of 1905-1906, but by 1907 he was saying that the Majlis and its plans were leading away from the initial aims of the movement and that the constitutionalists were importing the customs and practices of the West.

Sheikh Nuri attacked the supplementary law to the constitution which was the product of a fragile compromise between the secular reformers and the Ulema, as a "book of error" and labeled the constitutionalists atheists. For Nuri sovereignty belonged exclusively to God. The Qur'an, he argued, contains all the regulations for administration of the state; therefore any legislative assembly was superfluous. He favored an Islamic Government based on the fusion of Shi'ism with monarchy in which the Majlis was an extension of the Ulema's power.

However, there were other Mojtaheds like Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai and Mirza Mohammad Hossein Gharavi Naini, who were not of the same opinion of Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri. Tabatabai was willing to accept Western ideas into the framework of political structures that was necessary to govern human affairs in the absence of Hidden Imam. Naini argued that a constitutional form of government that limits the ruler's arbitrary power and grants people limited sovereignty was less abhorrent than other forms. He further stated that the sovereignty of the people and equality before the law were the foundation of the government set up by the Prophet Mohammad in Mecca.

The division of the Ulema into two hostile factions of constitutionalist and anti-constitutionalist, on the one hand, and the rancorous relationship between the secular reformers and the constitutional Ulema, on the other hand, had weakened the Constitutional Movement.



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## FALL OF REVOLUTION

In June, 1908, the Shah decided that he had enough support to act and sent the Cossack brigade to attack the Majlis. The troops fired shells at the building until the delegates gave in, and the assembly was closed. Many leading members were arrested and executed, while others escaped overseas. The Shah's coup was successful in Tehran, but not in all the provinces. The constitutionalists unified their forces from various parts of Iran and surrounded Tehran. On July 16, 1909, Mohamad Ali Shah took refuge in the Russian Legation. He was deposed, went into exile in Russia, and was replaced by his young son, Ahmad.

The constitutionalists were back in control, but the revolution had turned more dangerous. The divisions between radicals and conservatives had deepened. The Ulemas were divided, and many sided with the royalists, effectively rejecting the whole project of constitutionalism. But within a few days the leader of the conservative Ulema, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri was arrested, tried and hanged for his alleged connections with the coup of June, 1908.

There were disorder in many provinces, it became impossible to collect taxes, tribal leaders took over in some areas, and brigandage became common place. To try to restore order, to counter the influence of the Russian – Officered Cossack brigade, and above all to establish a body that could enforce tax collection, the Majlis set up a gendarmerie trained by Swedish officers.

When the Majlis invited an American, Morgan Shuster, to come to Iran to reform the country's chaotic finances, both Russia and England opposed the appointment of this concerned adviser, fearing that his reforms would be detrimental to their interests. The Russians gave the Majlis an ultimatum to dismiss Shustern, which it ignored. As Russian troops marched towards Teharan, Shuster was dismissed and the Majlis was dissolved in December, 1911. That date is the one normally taken for the end of the Constitutional Revolution.

## CONCLUSION

The revolution fell victim to violent factionalism among the Iranians themselves, and also to the machinations of the Russians and the British. But the Constitutional Revolution was an important event in the history of Iran. It was the first attempt in the region by a people to set

up a liberal representative government by their own efforts. The experience of representative government had a powerful, unifying effect in confirming and energizing Iranian nationalism. The spirit and the goals of constitutionalism stayed alive and vigorous, and were a major factor in Iranian political life for the rest of the century.

Subsequent regimes repeatedly bypassed or flouted it, but the constitution of 1906 remained in force until the revolution of 1979. The Majlis continued to be elected and to meet, and in 1919 was instrumental in preventing a post-war attempt to establish a British protectorate in Iran.

The Constitutional Movement popularized the notion that the King's power cannot be unlimited arbitrarily, and granted people rights and powers they hitherto had not enjoyed, such as equity before the law. In many ways, it was an auspicious victory for the Iranian people.

The events of Constitutional Revolution were also present in the minds of Iranians in the 1970's as a warning. In particular the more politically minded among the clergy had learned the lesson that the Ulema should not allow political leadership to slide out of their hands as they had in 1906.

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