
Liberty and Licence in the Constitutional Revolution

of Iran

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It is characteristic of Iranian revolts and rebellions that they usually occur when the state is perceived to be weak and unable to enforce its authority. Naser al-Din Shah was an arbitrary ruler like all his predecessors. But, the consequences of arbitrary rulers were not all alike either for themselves or for the country. Much depended on their personalities as well as the circumstances in which they lived. For example, the fall of the Safavid state and its dreadful consequences for Iranian society and economy were largely due to the personality traits of Shah Sultan Hosain which combined extreme promiscuity and intemperance with common superstition, susceptibility to influence, and timidity and indecisiveness at moments of crisis. Otherwise, the state would not have fallen so swiftly and miserably in the face of rebellion by some of the poorest and most backward nomads of the far eastern provinces of the empire.¹

For all his love of women and hunting – neither of which was unusual among Iranian rulers – Naser al-Din was no Sultan Hosain. On the contrary, he was an intelligent, self-confident, upright and strong man: it would be sufficient to examine his photograph together with the Prince and Princess of Wales, Lord and Lady Salisbury, and British and Iranian officials and dignitaries to read much of these traits off the picture itself.² The decline of the state – especially, though not exclusively, during the last three decades of his reign – was therefore much more a result of the long term trend of the rise of industry and empire in Europe than of any unusual weakness in his character. Throughout his reign he managed to maintain as well as exert his authority in the centre and provinces, and preserve his dignity towards foreign powers; and he managed the decline in Iran's political, economic and military power better than many other arbitrary rulers might have done.

The relative erosion of his own authority towards the end of his reign was partly due to the publicly evident fact of his growing weakness vis-à-vis European powers, and the increasing belief that all the country's ills were due to arbitrary rule, a belief which was

¹ See further, Homa Katouzian, "Problem of political development in Iran: democracy, dictatorship or arbitrary government?", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, XXII; *Estebdad, Demokrasi Va Nehzat-e Melli* (London and Tehran, 1993/1372), especially chapters one and five; "Arbitrary rule: a theory of state, politics and society in Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, XXIV; "The aridisolatic society: a model of long term social and economic development in Iran", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, July 1983; *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (London and New York, 1981), especially chapters 2–5. For a detailed description of events in the specific case of the collapse of the Safavid state, see, Lawrence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavid Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958); *Nadir Shah* (London, 1938).

² The picture in question has been published in Denis Wright, *The Persians amongst the English: Episodes in Anglo-Persian History* (London, 1985).

entirely a result of direct – and rather simplistic – comparisons with Europe. The Tobacco Rebellion had some obvious economic motives, but it was the first political movement of its kind in the country's history in as much as, (a) the society challenged the state on a *specific issue*, (b) it was an attack on arbitrary government, not just an arbitrary ruler, and (c) it succeeded in reversing an arbitrary decision without the complete destruction of the regime itself. Thus it would be described as the first *political* movement in the country's history: there was a struggle over a major *specific issue* which was resolved by a political decision; it badly damaged the Shah's authority; but he still managed to minimise his losses.³ Large scale historical speculation is usually of little consequence, but it would seem eminently reasonable to suggest that if someone like his son and successor had ruled in his place in the second half of the nineteenth century, the country might even have been ripped apart from within if not from without.

It was not just the enlightened public that saw arbitrary government as the source of the country's backwardness and decline. The Shah himself shared the belief, and that was why he lent his own authority to Sepahsalar-e Qazvini's reformist measures towards the creation of an orderly and responsible government.⁴ He could see the benefits of an *organised and orderly administration* to himself as well as the country, but it took no more than a little while for him to recognize the implications of *responsible government* for his own position and role in the country. Yet it is significant that he came back to the theme immediately after returning from his third visit to Europe when he ordered the state luminaries to set up a council of state. His brother, Abbas Mirza Molk Ara, who was present in that fruitless meeting, even quotes him as saying:

all the *order and progress* which we observed in Europe in our recent visit is due to the existence of law. Therefore, we too have made up our mind to introduce a law and act according to it.⁵

The main reason why this gesture too came to nothing – indeed it came to far less than the Sepahsalar attempt – may have been the conflict between his interest in social progress and his reluctance to give up his arbitrary power. But there may well have been another factor equally at work in his mind against a genuine reform of the system along constitutional lines.

³ When he had decided to back down, he wrote in his first letter to Hajj Mirza Hasan Mojtahed-e Ashtiyani: "As for the tobacco question, no-one is infallible, and – among human beings – perfect knowledge belongs to the pure person of our prophet, peace be unto him. There are times when one takes a decision which he later regrets. Just on this tobacco business I had already thought of withdrawing the domestic monopoly ... such that they would not be able to complain and ask for a large compensation and, at the same time, the people be rid of the European monopoly of internal trade which was truly harmful. We were about to take action when the edict (*hokm*) of Mirza-ye Shirazi ... was published in Isfahan and gradually reached Tehran ... Would it not have been better if you had petitioned us – either individually or collectively to withdraw the monopoly ... without all the noise and the stopping (*tark*) of *qal'ian*". See Nazem al-Islam-e Kermani, *Tarikh-e Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, ed., Sa'idi Sirjani, (Tehran, 1362/1983), pp. 22–39.

⁴ After Sepahsalar-e Qazvini submitted his draft constitution to the Shah for the creation of a *responsible* Council of Ministers, the Shah wrote beneath it: "*Jenab-e Sadr-e A 'zam*: I very much approve of this account which you have written concerning the Council of Ministers. With God's blessings make the necessary arrangements and put it into action soon, since any delay would mean a loss to the state." Quoted in Abdullah Mostawfi, *Sharh-e Zendegani-ye Man*, i, (Tehran, 1360/1981), p. 123. See also Mostashar al-Dawleh's death-bed letter to the heir-designate, Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, in Nazem al-Islam-e Kermani, *Tarikh-e Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, pp. 172–7. See further, Feraiidun-e Adamiyat, *Feker-e Ejtema 'i-ye Demokrasi dar Nehzat-e Mashrutiat-e Iran* (Tehran, 1354/1975).

⁵ See Abdolhosain Nava'i, ed., *Sharh-e Hal-e Abbas Mirza Molk Ara* (Tehran, 1361/1982), p. 175, emphasis added.

The problem had once been echoed by his great-grandfather when he expressed amazement to his European visitors as to how it would be possible to run a country where others had a share in the ruler's decision making.⁶ His disbelief would appear to be perfectly understandable once we remember that in Iran's historical experience chaos and disorder had been the only alternative to arbitrary government, and that he would only have had to refresh his memory about the country's fate after the fall of the Safavid state. Down to the present day most Iranians – and many, if not most, Iranian intellectuals – use the terms *estebdad*, *hokumat-e motlaqeh* (i.e. absolutism and despotism) and *diktatori* interchangeably, and believe that *demokrasi* is a weak and ineffectual system which would invariably result in rebellion, chaos, disorder and disintegration – in *fetneh*, *ashub*, *harj-o-marj* and *khan-khani*. That is, they identify Iranian *estebdad* with European dictatorship, and Iranian *ashub* or *khan-khani* with European democracy.

Fath 'Ali Shah may therefore be excused for his lack of faith in responsible government, but Naser al-Din had seen for himself that, in Europe, government based on law was orderly, efficient and successful. Yet he may have been worried about losing control precisely because Iranian society had known no alternative to arbitrary government but chaos. The story put forward by his daughter, Taj al-Saltaneh, that his assassination was arranged by Amin al-Sultan and his associates who knew that he was determined to inaugurate a constitutional regime immediately after the celebration of his golden jubilee, cannot be taken seriously. Yet there is an insight in her view that the Shah had been mindful of the possible ungovernability of the state if he gave up his arbitrary power.⁷ At any rate that is what increasingly happened through and after the constitutional revolution.

In fact the process began shortly after Naser al-Din's own death. In Iranian history, rebellion normally began and succeeded at times of crisis, and when the government was weak, divided, and ineffectual. Already, the country had been in a state of crisis for some time, when Naser al-Din's assassination both demonstrated and exacerbated the extent of the rift between state and society. The new Shah was timid and feeble, and there was a relentless power struggle among courtiers, ministers and state officials. Slowly, the process of disintegration began both at the centre and in the provinces, several years before widespread public agitation started for a reform of the regime. Almost every contemporary source cites "the hungry and frustrated Turks" as quickly setting about to loot the treasury immediately after the arrival of the new Shah from Tabriz.

The "Turks" in question were the Azerbaijani and other courtiers, favourites and entourage of Mozaffar al-Din who had endured long years in his service as governor in

⁶ See Abdolhosain Nava'i, *Iran va Jahan*, vol. 2, Tehran: 1369/1990.

⁷ See *Khaterat-e Taj al-Saltaneh*, eds. Mansureh Ettehadiyeh and Sirus Sa'dvandiyan (Tehran, 1362/1983). She quotes her stepmother, Anis al-Dawleh (p. 60) that – shortly before his fateful visit to Hazrat-e Abdol 'azim – the Shah had told her that, after the golden jubilee celebrations, "I would abolish the [land] tax, establish a consultative assembly, and call for elected deputies from the provinces. I don't think that my assassination would serve the *ra'iyat's* interest". E'temad al-Saltaneh, who died before the Shah, thought that Amin-al Sultan was disloyal towards his master (see, *Ruznameh-ye Khaterat-e E'temad al-Saltaneh*, ed. Iraj Afshar, Tehran, 1350/1971). The two men were great enemies to the extent that when the former died, Atabak and Hajj Amin al-Zarb were accused of having arranged his death by a Florentine technique. See, for example, Khan Malek-e Sasani, *Siyasatgaran-e Daureh-ye Qajar* (Tehran, n.d., date of the preface, 1338/1959), and Abdolhosain Nava'i, *Iran va Jahan*, ii, who go on to add that they then contacted Mirza Reza to prepare for the assassination of the Shah. The allegations cannot be taken seriously and are typical of Iranian conspiracy theories. See further, *Khaterat-e Siyasi-ye Mirza Ali Khan-e Amin al-Dawleh*, ed. Hafez Farmanfarniyan (Tehran, 1370/1991).

Tabriz eagerly counting the days for the termination of his father's long reign.⁸ They were uncouth and inexperienced, and could influence his decisions much more successfully than the more able and experienced state officials at the centre. The latter in their turn were at loggerheads, and – as usual – engaged in mutually destructive rivalry. At first, Amin al-Sultan was retained as chief minister, but he was quickly dismissed in favour of Amin al-Dawleh. Talebof believed that Amin al-Dawleh could have saved the situation in the interest of both *dawlat* and *mellat*, and succeeded in bringing about orderly constitutional reform.⁹ Perhaps. But in any case he was dismissed after only six months, mainly – some contemporary sources say wholly – because he put a stop to the financial gains and extraordinary powers of the “Turks” as well as many others. He was replaced by his much more cunning and self-interested – but probably also more able – predecessor. And, although he lasted longer than the man whose downfall he had helped, he in turn was replaced by one of the “Turks”, the Qajar nobleman (*shahzadeh*) Ain al-Dawleh, who was unsuited to the management of the growing crisis both within the state and among the people.

To show the extent of confusion, chaos and inability to deal with day-to-day matters within the state and government itself long before the onset of the confrontation with society, it would be useful to cite a few examples briefly from two important contemporary sources, both by the same author, which have been recently published in one volume for the first time, and report on daily events between the new Shah's succession in 1896 and when the struggle began for an independent judiciary early in 1905. These are the *Mer'at al-Vaqaye'-e Mozaffari* and the *Notes and Diaries* of Abdolhosain Khan Sepehr. Entitled Malek al-Movarrehkin as well as Lesan al-Saltaneh, the author was no revolutionary hot head. A grandson of the famous Lesan al-Molk, author of *Nasekh al-Tavarikeh*, he was not a political activist, and even dedicated and formally presented the first book to the Shah himself.

In 1897 Amin al-Dawleh becomes *Vazir-e A'zam* and declares that letters written to him should exclude the customary flattering addresses or he would not read them. Otherwise he would read *in toto* every letter which he receives. After his fall these practices are discontinued. Later in the year there is unrest among Tehran's notables, ulema and privileged people because the Vazir plans to cut off their privy purses. Besides, he is very much in control of the seal of his office, does not seal any written order without reading it first, does not grant money to anyone without good reason, pays no attention to the contradictory edicts of the ulema, and to some extent has blocked their ways of making illicit money. Amin al-Sultan, the former *Sadr-e A'zam*, is busy promising to reverse all this if he replaces the incumbent. Shortly afterwards this happens.¹⁰

⁸ Two very good contemporary sources on the “Turks” are *Khaterat-e Taj al-Saltaneh* and *Khaterat-e Ehtesham al-Saltaneh* (S. M. Musavi, ed., Tehran, 1367/1988) although rarely does a contemporary source omit to mention them and their deeds.

⁹ After Amin al-Dawleh's death, Talebof wrote in a private letter: “God immerse him in his blessings. It is extremely sad that he is not alive now to end the problem of our lack of statesmanship. A long time would have to pass before anyone of his calibre could emerge . . .” See *Yaghma*, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 179.

¹⁰ *Yaddasht-ha-ye Malek al-Movarrehkin va Mer'at al-Vaqaye'-e Mozaffari*, Abdolhosain Nava'i, ed. (Tehran, 1368/1989). See *Mer'at*, pp. 127–247. It is worth emphasizing that evidence of increasing disorder and chaos may be found in almost all contemporary sources and the sources written later by and with first-hand experience of the events. Indeed, in his voluminous memoirs Abdullah Mostawfi occasionally refers to the period between the turn of the twentieth century and the coup d'état of 1921 as “the twenty-year chaos”. Here we shall cite the evidence from Malek al-Movarrehkin's two books because they have almost just come to light, they cover the years

Aziz Mirza is a Qajar nobleman and “one of the noblest ruffians of Tehran”. Together with his band he causes a great public mischief, and the governor of Tehran – apparently ignorant of his being a *shazdeh* – has the soles of his feet beaten with a stick. While the governor is watching the beating, Aziz Mirza pulls a “revolver” out of his pocket and fires a bullet which misses him. The governor reports the incident to the Shah and the latter orders them to cut off his hand. This causes unrest among other young *shazdehs*, the Shah sacks the governor and orders him to pay 600 tomans compensation to the mutilated man, and expels the officer who had arrested him from town.¹¹ In the royal *farman* for the new grand vazir it is mentioned that “he is an expert in the affairs and *polteek* of the state, be they domestic or foreign”.¹²

Early in 1899 bread is short in Tabriz. The landlords are suspected of hoarding, there are riots in the city, shops strike, and many people take *bast* at a shrine. Enemies of Nazem al-Ulama – a leading landlord and religious figure – declare him to be the main culprit. The mob attack his house, and there are a few deaths and injuries. The exceptionally able and respected Hasan Ali Khan Garrusi, the Amir Nezam, twice intervenes and humours the mob and public to relent. Nazem al-Ulama leaves for Tehran. Next day, “the hooligans and ruffians” (*ashrar va oushah*) attack his house again, and loot and set fire to it. They also attack and loot the homes of his brother and his nephew, the latter of whom is *chef-de-cabinet* to the heir designate and governor of Azerbaijan.¹³

Ain al-Dawleh, Tehran’s governor, receives a regular “bribe” of about 1,000 tomans a day from the bakers and butchers. Bread as well as meat are short and expensive. Some women stop the Shah’s and Ain al-Dawleh’s carriages and complain. The governor orders them to be beaten up. There is an on-going struggle between the chief minister and “the Shah’s Turkish lackeys”. Salar al-Dawleh – one of the Shah’s sons and governor of Borujerd and Arabistan (later Khuzistan) – is behaving very unjustly towards the people and families there, and rapes the women. A brother of the Shah who rules Kashan has behaved so unjustly that the people have taken *bast* in Qom’s shrine. When the Vazir is told that money is so short and injustice so great that the state is about to fall, he answers that he is so busy defending his own position that he has no time to see to these problems. In the following month “the Shah’s Turkish lackeys” together with Ain al-Dawleh are agitating against the Vazir. There is a great shortage of bread in Kashan.¹⁴

The governor of Mashhad – a grandson of Fath ‘Ali Shah – has angered the people so much that they strike and go on the rampage. The governor runs away. The Shah sends 300 troops without success. Then the Shah backs down and sacks the governor. This does not satisfy the people who set fire to his father’s grave. Shortly afterwards they riot again and kill Hajeb al-Tawlieh (“one of the town’s rabble”). The Russians send word that unless the government quells the unrest they would send troops to protect their subjects. The Shah is frightened, but the Vazir says he is unable to act successfully unless he is given real power. The Shah agrees. This happens when thirty men closest to the Shah have

immediately before the onset of the revolution, and they have systematically recorded the events at the time of their happening. For corroborating evidence, see for example, Abdullah Mostawfi, *Shah-e Zendegani-ye Man* . . . , ii & iii (Tehran, 1360/1981); Yahya Dawlat-Abadi, *Hayat-e Yahya*, iii & iv (Tehran, 1372/1992); Hajj Mokhber al-Saltaneh, *Khaterat va Khatarat* (Tehran, 1363/1984); *Khaterat-e Ehtesham al-Saltaneh*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 306–7.

¹⁴ See *Yaddasht-ha*, pp. 20–2.

conspired against the Vazir, and he is about to fall. Next month one of the Shah's sons who was governor of Araq, Golpaigan and Khansar is removed because he has done grave injustice to the people, taking their money, raping their women, and accumulating 100,000 tomans over a short period.¹⁵

There are riots in Azerbaijan. They say there should be no Armenians in Tabriz, and the heads of post and customs offices should be Muslim. The ulema of Tabriz are behind "the rabble". The governor of Gilan has died. Some say he has been poisoned. He was a favourite of the Shah and an enemy of the chief minister. Within a short period he made two-and-a-half million [tomans]. After his death the government orders his house to be sealed off on the "pretext that his accounts would have to be investigated".¹⁶

The governor of Fars summons the Qashqa'i chiefs. They refuse, and say if it is for taxes someone should be sent to them and they would pay up. The governor is angered and sends troops against them. They shoot forty of them down, and the government is now helpless against the Qashqa'is.¹⁷ The Bakhtiyaris refuse to pay their tax. Mounted troops are sent from Tehran to collect it. They kill a few of them and the rest run away.¹⁸

The chief minister, Amin al-Sultan, resigns, and two months later Ain al-Dawleh replaces him.¹⁹ "The Shah has told those around him that he likes three things in life and regards all other things as worthless: eating, hunting and copulation".²⁰

A note of obituary for a grandson of Fath 'Ali Shah. It said that the late Shah used to have illicit relations with him. When he was governor of Astarabad – later Gorgan – he subdued the rebel Turkomans, and then killed and looted the property of the loyal Turkomans who had helped him subdue the rebels. As governor of Khamseh he also killed and looted the property of many innocent people. Although the Shah had been told of all this, he was made head of the armed forces and took much of their pay for himself. They say his estate is worth five million tomans.²¹

Qavam al-Dawleh has become *Vazir-e Lashkar*, despite the fact that the year before he had been publicly flogged and imprisoned, because he has paid 20,000 tomans for the post.²² In Russian Azerbaijan Shi'as and Armenians have clashed. "They say *Ingilis-ha* have been behind it so as to destroy the Russian government completely".²³

In 1904, a prominent Qajar nobleman quarrels with a merchant over property and seeks the help of Sayyid Abdullah Behbahani whose students beat up the police (*farrash*), and the nobleman in question breaks the rib of one of them. The heir-designate, Mohammad Ali Mirza, has him brought before himself, personally beats him, orders that the soles of his feet be heavily beaten by a stick, and throws him into jail. Next morning he orders his release, apologizes to him, and gives him a ring.²⁴ It is years now that the Lor nomads around Behbahan loot the town people's property, rape the women and sell the men into slavery at lucrative prices.²⁵ The people of Quchan run away to Akhal over the Russian border to escape from the injustices of local rulers and, being destitute, sell their daughters to Turkomans.²⁶

Political agitation begins in mosques. The sermon of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Isfahani and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

the activities of Tabataba'i and Behbahani are noted.²⁷ The Russian revolution of 1905 is also noted as is the decision of the Tsar to grant constitutional government. It is described as *hokumat-e mashruteh* in Persian.²⁸ Vazir Nezam "takes for himself" one toman of the pay of every soldier under him [as a rule they gave the soldiers' pay to their commanders to distribute among them]. The soldiers get together and give him a good beating. The Shah dismisses him and gives his regiment to someone else.²⁹ The Imam Jom'eh gives the home of a dead prostitute to a prayer leader. The relatives of the deceased complain to the governor of Tehran. The governor sends for the prayer leader, swears at him as well as the Imam Jom'eh, and restores the property to the beneficiaries of the dead woman. Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri intervenes, but the governor sends him a message full of invectives, saying that he has no authority, is neither the Shah nor the Grand Vazir, and even if the latter likes him he does not.³⁰

A Zoroastrian has had illicit relations with a married sister of the Shah. The governor arrests him but lets him go after he pays 25,000 tomans. The go-between is also arrested and the soles of his feet are heavily beaten, but he is released after he pays the governor more than a thousand tomans.³¹ Bread is short and expensive in Tehran. The bakers' leader (*Nanva Bashi*) is ordered to be brought before the Grand Vazir and the governor. To frighten him, the Vazir tells the executioner to "tear off his belly", but the governor pretends to intervene on his behalf. Instead, they have the soles of his feet heavily beaten and obtain a pledge that he would solve the bread problem. Next day the price of bread rises even further.³² The next day the famous heavy flogging of the sugar merchants on the governor's orders occurs which results in angry public reactions and ends in the *bast* of many of the leading ulema and their supporters in the shrine of Hazrat-e Abdol'azim.

Malek al-Movarrehkhin's *Yaddashtha* come to a sudden end with his note on the meeting of the royal council convened on the Shah's orders to set up an independent judiciary, in which Ehtesham al-Saltaneh – former head of Iran's legation in Berlin – famously attacks Amir Bahador-e Jang, the Shah's "Turkish lackey" *par excellence*, for opposing legal justice.³³

An analysis of the revolution

Throughout most of this century almost all modern Iranian as well as Soviet analytical assessments of the Constitutional Revolution agreed that it was a bourgeois revolution. This view was held not just by Marxist intellectuals but by the great majority of modern educated Iranians. The only alternative explanation attributed the whole of the movement

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 251–2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260. Incidentally this should end speculation about whether or not the term *mashruteh* had had currency before the constitution was granted. The traditional term, of course, was *qonstitusium*. This became a matter of dispute between Mohammad Ali Shah and the Majlis when the former insisted that his father's *farman* which he too had endorsed at the time had specifically granted *qonstitusium* not *mashruteh*. See, for example, Mokhber al-Saltaneh (*Gozarash-e Iran: Qajariyeh va Mashrutiyyat*, Tehran, 1363/1984) who had told the Shah that the former could have a more radical meaning than the latter.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 271–2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³³ See *Khaterat-e Ehtesham al-Saltaneh*, Nazem al-Islam-e Kermani, *Tarikh-e Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, and Ahmad Kasravi, *Tarikh-e Mashruteh-ye Iran* (Tehran, 1346/1967).

to a plot by Britain in order to put an end to Russian influence in Iran. This was a popular view among the generations who themselves had supported or participated in the revolution, but had later regretted it partly because their utopian hopes were dashed but mainly as a consequence of the chaos which prevailed and the threat of disintegration which the country faced shortly after their victory celebrations had ended. Not even the fact that after the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 the attitude of the British legation in Tehran became indifferent towards the revolution – to the great dismay if not anger of the revolutionaries and their leaders – seemed to need an explanation by the holders of the conspiracy theory. Their attitude was almost perfectly analogous to that of so many ardent supporters of, and participants in, the revolution of 1977–9 who later maintained that it had been the work of America, Britain, or both, that the hostage taking of US diplomats in Tehran was engineered by America herself, that America and other Western powers had instigated the Iraq-Iran war, and that the currently running worldwide American campaign against the Islamic government is no more than a camouflage.

The fact that the later generations did not advocate the convenient conspiracy theory of their forebears was due to four principal factors: (a) they had little experience of “constitutional” disorder and chaos; (b) they contrasted the *aims* of the constitutional revolution with the reality of dictatorial or arbitrary regimes under which they lived; (c) they lived at a time when revolutions and revolutionaries were highly respectable in Iran and in many other third world countries; (d) there was the attractive alternative explanation that it was a bourgeois revolution – high sounding, and associated with an ideology which was politically powerful and intellectually stimulating.

Marx's concept of bourgeois revolutions is a product of his theory of (European) history or his historical sociology (of Europe). This in turn was based on his philosophy of social change in the wider sense of the term. The two are often believed to be synonymous, and this has been another factor in giving rise to the view that Marx's theory of European history is universal in time and space. The former is universal in scope because – like all such philosophies – it is in the nature of a grand metaphysical conception (the appellation “metaphysical” is not intended as a pejorative term; it defines all universal categories which are inherently untestable, but which may none the less be useful in formulating testable general theories with limited scopes of application; rather like theories of knowledge and epistemological concepts which, too, are both universal and inherently untestable, but may be usefully employed for the construction of specific methods of scientific discovery).

In his philosophy of social change, Marx disagreed with Hegel and Hegelians – often described as Idealists – who held the view that ideas alone determined the course of events – and stressed the role of the natural environment, the productive technology and social institutions in influencing individual and social existence. But he also rejected Materialism which denied any independent role for human consciousness – as in Feurbach's “man is what he eats” – though most of his followers in this century accepted it. The extent of human knowledge and the scope of further discovery at each stage of history was limited because, at every stage, humans set themselves such problems as they could possibly solve. Or, what is the same thing, problems which demanded solutions bore a definite relationship to the changing needs and requirements of human existence. Social and material constraints did not prevent speculation into the nature of any conceivable problem. But

when a problem was too abstract, too irrelevant to the contemporary environment, it would be very difficult to resolve satisfactorily; and if somehow (by accident or ultra-genious) it was resolved, it would languish for want of application and would be generally ignored until later, when socio-environmental relevance would force its being uncovered or rediscovered.³⁴

In this context, Marx drew a distinction between the base (or infrastructure) of a social system – broadly characterised by the state and nature of its existing technological achievements – and the social edifice, or superstructure, that is, the existing social relations, which set the constitution of social, political and legal conduct, and the institutions of public and private morality. There are at least three interpretations of Marx's theory of social change; one which makes superstructural change a rigid function of basic infrastructural transformations; another which allows superstructural changes (and, in particular, changes in socio-political constitutions and norms of moral behaviour) even on the basis of the existing infrastructure; and a third which regards social change (even including major infrastructural changes) as a consequence of the interaction between the basic and infrastructural forces.³⁵ The first interpretation – favoured by most twentieth-century Marxists – is due to Engels, Kautsky and their Russian followers, and others who have followed them in their turn and the only clear evidence for it in the works of Marx occurs in an unusually simplistic passage in the preface to his *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Marx's own view oscillated between the second interpretation (as in the first volume of *Capital*, 1864) and the third, as in his earlier works such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847, *The German Ideology*, 1845, and *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844.³⁶

Marx argued that, in their conception of social reality, humans were strongly influenced not only by their personal history and self interest but notably by their social history and class interest. Here he had in mind the independent, functional, classes of European society: classes which were ruled by, but were independent from, the state, and the movement in and out of which was rare and unusual – they were solid, not malleable, social entities. He saw European history as a process of struggle between social classes – masters and slaves, patricians and plebians, feudal lords and serfs, the nobility and the bourgeoisie, industrial capitalists and the proletariat; and their sub-divisions. He cited as his major evidence the revolt of the Spartacist slaves in ancient Rome, the European peasant revolts in the thirteenth century and beyond it, the peasant revolts in sixteenth century Germany after Luther's attack on the church of Rome, the English revolutions and civil wars in the seventeenth century, the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, and the European revolutions of 1848 which he himself witnessed and supported.³⁷

³⁴ See, among other sources, Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, second edition (London, 1955). W. A. Kaufman, *Hegel* (New York, 1957); and *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (New York, 1960). David McLellan, *Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London, 1969). Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy and Politics* (Cambridge, 1947).

³⁵ See, Homa Katouzian, *Ideology and Method in Economics* (London and New York, 1980), pp. 151–2.

³⁶ See, for example, Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science: Anti-Dühring*, ed., C. P. Dutt (London, 1943); *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow, 1964); Nikkoli Bukharin, *Historical Materialism* (New York, 1928); Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (London, 1941).

³⁷ See, for example, Homa Katouzian, *Ideology and Method in Economics*. George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London,

It was against such empirical and historical evidence from European history and society that he put forward his theory of social change. And he expressly excluded Asiatic societies from this theory of European history because he realized that both the sociology and the pattern of historical change in Asian societies had been fundamentally different from the experience of Europe.³⁸

Marxist analyses of the Constitutional Revolution have run along the following lines. Economic development in the nineteenth century – especially as a result of increasing trade with Russia and Western Europe – led to the growth of an urban bourgeoisie who could not be accommodated within the existing feudal – or “semi-feudal” – system. In the well known Marxist terminology, the forces of production – that is, the combined effects of capital accumulation and technical progress – had developed to the extent that the relations of production (i.e. the prevailing class structure, and the social, legal and moral institutions corresponding to it) could no longer contain them. The resulting conflict between the technological base and the institutional superstructure – in other words, the socio-economic reality and the ideological appearance – eventually manifested itself in a political upheaval for the establishment of a new (and historically relevant) institutional framework.

This is a brief and basic statement of a familiar model, for the original formulation of which the French Revolution had supplied much of the empirical data. It has also been used by some historians and sociologists of Iran with some (occasionally significant) qualifications. For example, the adapted versions have tended to put more emphasis on the accumulation of *financial* as opposed to *physical* (i.e. *industrial*) capital in nineteenth century Iran, or they have considered the political and economic impact of imperialism, and European ideologies, also as important factors. There is no doubt that all such factors among others must be included in *any* analysis of the Constitutional Revolution, but the question is whether or not the Marxist model itself would make sense in this case.

It has been shown in the author's earlier studies that Iran was not a feudal society, and that the arbitrary system did not allow the long term accumulation of capital, and investment in expensive and extensive means of industrial production which could not be quickly realized in money form. Apart from these general points, a close statistical and historical study of the Iranian economy in the nineteenth century has not revealed a pattern of development consistent with the above model.³⁹ It is true that the impact of the rise of industry and empire in Europe jolted the Iranian economy out of its traditional equilibrium and opened it up more than before to international trade such that it tended to export cash crops and import manufactured products.⁴⁰ Apart from that, loss of territory reshaped the map of the country, robbing it (sometimes) of some of its best natural and human resources, diminishing both its productive capacity and its internal market, and reducing its military and political power.

1962). John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London, 1954). Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (Oxford, third edition, 1963); David McLellan, *Karl Marx* (London, 1973).

³⁸ The more important primary references are to be found in Marx's contributions to the American newspaper *Daily Tribune* in the 1850s, and his brief analytical classification of societies in the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). For detailed bibliographical references, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974); and Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, 1957).

³⁹ See, Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, Chapter 2, text as well as the appendix.

⁴⁰ See, *ibid.*, tables 3.2 to 3.8. The structural change in favour of primary production and exports, and against manufacturing, may be seen particularly from table 3.7.

Among other things, the process of relative weakening resulted in the preferential tariff treaties which left the economically weak and technologically underdeveloped industry unprotected against the import of both cheap and fashionable machine-made products, which in turn led to a loss of manufactured exports, a shift to primary cash crop production, a possible decline in staple-food production, and a general rise in imports. The balance-of-payments deficit and the inflationary consequences were reinforced, as if by the wrath of God, through a dramatic fall in the international price of silver – on which most of Iran's money was based – in the last three decades of the century. Meanwhile the slow but fairly steady growth of population tended to depress the general living standards still further.⁴¹

There was no significant technical progress in the economic sense of the term. One could even observe economic *regress* in the sense of loss of traditional knowhow, refined over centuries, without the acquisition of a suitable substitute which – in economic terms – would be at least as useful as the foregone technique. The “technical progress” to which political historians usually point almost invariably refers to the minority *consumption* of the products of modern European technology. Likewise, there could not have been any significant increase in the accumulation of financial, and rise in the stock of physical, capital. There are no statistical figures for these important economic categories, but indirect evidence makes it very improbable that there was a significant increase in the stock of financial or physical capital: there had been no progress in the productive technology, both the internal and the external markets for Iran's manufactured goods had declined, taxes and other distortions had become more and more oppressive, the domestic debasement of the currency coupled with the great fall in the international price of silver had added much force to persistent inflation, and the traditionally high Iranian sense of social and economic uncertainty and insecurity had grown even further in consequence of these and other depressing factors.⁴²

Foreign trade grew and it was a main factor behind the tendency for the concentration as well as centralization of financial capital. But this was not the same as a substantial growth and accumulation of financial capital; it indicated shifts between different trade sectors as well as different individual merchants. Foreign trade benefited the big merchants, and by increasing their actual fortunes it increased their potential political power at the expense of the state. It also played an important role in weakening the arbitrary system in a number of indirect ways. First, the growing role and influence of imperial powers exposed the weakness of the Iranian state and robbed it of the traditional belief in its omnipotence in dealing with domestic questions. Secondly, their illicit payments to the Shah and state officials helped weaken the structure of arbitrary rule from within. Thirdly, the greater specialization in the production and export of raw materials, the relative decline of traditional manufacturing, the use of modern means of communication such as the telegraph, the endemically rising inflationary trends, the crippling deficit in foreign payments and the resulting accumulation of foreign debts, etc., led to a structural change in the economy which the traditional state apparatus could not comprehend, let alone cope with.

⁴¹ For the extent and effects of debasement, depreciation, inflation, etc., see, *ibid.*, text as well as tables 3.2–3.5.

⁴² For detailed analysis and evidence, see *ibid.*

Mainly through Russia, Britain and France, Europe was exposed to the eyes and ears of Iranians as the magic model of power, prosperity and progress. The intelligentsia, who included many Qajar noblemen and state officials, looked for the key to this great and wonderful secret, and they found it – writ large – as LAW.⁴³ They saw law first as responsible and – especially – orderly government, and later as freedom. It would make private property safe and powerful, official positions less insecure and more responsible, and protect life and limb against arbitrary decisions. And they believed that this alone would turn the country into a powerful and prosperous state.

The nature of any revolution may be discerned by an examination of its *aims*, its *supporters*, its *opponents*, and its *results*. Here, the central objective – indeed the very desideratum and password – was *mashruteh*, that is, government *conditioned* by law, before the coining of which the Persianized term “*qonstitusiun*” was almost invariably used. Almost all merchants, artisans and shopkeepers, most of the ulema and religious community, many if not most of the landlords and nomadic chieftains, most of the ordinary urban public, and the entire modern intelligentsia either actively or passively supported it. In particular, the triumph of 1909 would not have been possible without the full support of the great religious leaders such as Hajj Mirza Hosain Tehrani, Akhund Mullah Kazem Khorasani, Shaikh Abdullah Mazandarani and others, as well as such powerful landlords and nomadic chieftains as Sepahdar-e (later, Sepahsalar-e) Tonokaboni, Sepahdar-e Rashti, Aliqoli Khan Sardar As’ad and Najafqoli Khan Samsam al-Saltaneh. What is more revealing, perhaps, is that not a single social class (*qua*) resisted the revolution, in total contrast to all the minor as well as major modern European revolutions since the seventeenth century. And the most important achievement of the revolution was *mashruteh* itself, that is, constitutional government as it had been understood by its campaigners and supporters. It is clear from all that, that the Constitutional Revolution was not a bourgeois – nor any other European-type – revolution.

A note on the role of the ulema

Constitutionalism was a revolt of the (urban) society against the state. Until the recent Iranian revolution there was a strong tendency among the Iranian intelligentsia to regard the ulema as solid supporters of the earlier revolution. Few had heard the name – or little but the name – of Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri, let alone those of Sayyed Abolqasem Imam Jom’eh, Shaikh Mohammad Amoli, Hajj Aqa Mohsen Araqy, Mirza Hasan Tabrizi and many of the lower ulema (e.g. Shaikh Mohammad Va’ez and Sayyed Ali Aqa Yazdi) who opposed the movement at its later stages by campaigning for *mashru’eh*. Since the early 1980s, on the other hand, there have been radical revisionist tendencies against the previous consensus, and not least in some recent academic studies of the subject.⁴⁴ It hardly needs

⁴³ They were many among the nobles and notables who raised the issue of law and responsible government before younger middle class intellectuals stepped in, including Abbas Mirza Molk Ara, Sepahsalar-e Qazvini, Malkam Khan, Mostashar al-Dawleh, Amin al-Dawleh, E’temad al-Saltaneh, Sa’d al-Dawleh, Mokhber al-Saltaneh, Sani ‘al-Dawleh and Ehtesham al-Saltaneh.

⁴⁴ For an especially uncompromising academic example of the revisionist account see, Mangol Bayat, *Iran’s First Revolution, Shi’ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909*. Vanessa Martin has examined the new view against the evidence and found that about two-thirds of the ulema supported constitutional government. See her

emphasizing that further studies of the role of the intelligentsia and specific political groups – such as democrats and social democrats – among them are to be welcomed.^{44a} But it would be a misreading of history to underrate the importance of the ulema for the movement and its ultimate victory, especially as the attitude of the urban crowd, the merchants and even landlords was much affected by theirs.

Mashru'eh was a vague term hastily thrown into the argument by Nuri and his followers to describe constitutionalism firmly based on the *shari'eh*. It was not a clear political concept as it lacked both form and content as an alternative to constitutional government, and the identification and cooperation of its advocates with the Shah's arbitrary rule left little credit for them as constitutionalists. The hindsight provided by the present Islamic republic into the thinking of the proponents of *mashru'eh* – although not unreasonable – is misleading. It even gives them more credit than they deserve: they were traditionalists who – at best – claimed that they wished to replace arbitrary rule with an authoritarian government based on the *shari'eh* while at the same time preserving the existing traditional social framework intact; they were even hysterical about the publication of newspapers. For all its so-called fundamentalism, the Islamic republic is much influenced – even though in a haphazard and disorderly fashion – by modern European ideas and experiences (including the Marxist and the Liberal which it formally denounces) both in its discourse and in its conduct. In a word, past *mashru'eh* was traditionalist whereas present Islamism is revisionist.

During their *bast* at the shrine of Hazrat-e Abdol'azim, Nuri and his followers issued a number of statements, some of which have survived in photographed copies and shed much light on their position, exposing their fears and forebodings about the consequences of *mashruteh*'s triumph. They are full of propagandist diatribes about Jewish men raping Muslim boys and women, allowing “a bunch of Zoroastrians” to enter a mosque, forcing the religious leaders to attend a meeting in the company of Frankish women (“*madamha-ye farangan*”), the conspiracies of Babis and atheists, and more of the same.⁴⁵ Yet they contain the essentials of their views and show that they were much more concerned about the application of modern European culture than the mere abolition of arbitrary government. In one of these *Layehahs* which they describe as “an account of the views of . . . Hajj Shaikh Fazlullah . . . and the other migrants to the sacred shrine” they say that “a year ago an idea was introduced from Europe that in any state where the Shah, ministers and governors could do what they like (*beh del-bekkah-e khod*) to the people, the government is the source of injustice, transgression and plunder; that [in such a country] there could be no prosperity, and that the inevitable persistence of the people's poverty would result in the country's loss of independence . . .” Therefore:

The people should combine and ask the Shah to change the arbitrary rule (*saltanat-e delkahananeh*) . . . and enter a contract so that, from then onwards, the Shah and his officials would strictly abide by that

Islam and Modernism: The Iranian Revolution of 1906 (London, 1989). However, as will be seen in the text below, no-one but Nuri among the *mashru'eh* supporters could compete *qualitatively* even with Behbahani and Tabataba'i, let alone the great ulema at Najaf.

^{44a} For a very recent study of the role of democrats, women, etc., Janet Afari, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*. (New York, 1996).

⁴⁵ See, Ahmad Kasravi, *Tarikh-e Mashruteh-ye Iran*, pp. 415–23.

contract ... They called that arbitrary rule – in the current parlance – *saltanat-e estebdadi*, and this contractual rule *saltanat-e mashruteh*.⁴⁶

The ulema then got together and agreed that the country's decline was due to "the lawlessness and unaccountability of the state", and that therefore there should be a popular consultative assembly to pass laws which would define the duties and limit the powers of governmental departments. No sooner had the Majlis been convened, however, than ideas began to circulate about the necessity of changing and improving some of the less fundamental *shari'eh* laws, and adapting them to contemporary needs and requirements,

such as ... the education of women and the founding of schools for girls, and the usage of funds hitherto used for *rawzeh-khani* and pilgrimage of sacred shrines for investment in factories and the paving of roads and streets, and in constructing railways and acquiring European industries ...⁴⁷

After a long diatribe against the *Anarshists*, the *Nehilists*, the *Sosialists*, the *Natooralists*, the *Babists*, and – in particular – the clever machinations of the latter two groups in Iran, they list their demands as follows: (a) The word *mashru'eh* should be added to *mashruteh* in the constitution; (b) It should be stated in the constitution that all legislation would have to be vetted by a group of the ulema who would be especially chosen by the leading *Maraji'* and no-one else; (c) The articles of the constitution such as that which declared the "absolute freedom of all publications" and was suitably amended by the ulema be revised and made consistent with the *shari'eh*.⁴⁸

It follows from this statement that they were opposed to such modernizing policies as the education of women, and the encouragement of saving and investment for economic development instead of contributing funds for such religious purposes as those mentioned by the statement; and that they were afraid of the adaptation and modernization of the less basic *shari'eh* rules, and fearful even of such things – which they described as *farangi* – as shouting "long live", displaying fireworks, and inviting foreign emissaries in the company of their wives to be present, at the official ceremony of the first anniversary of the issuance of the *farman* for constitutional government. The strong fear – arising from a total sense of alienation and lack of self-confidence – of an imminent onslaught of a wholly strange culture, and of losing their entire grip – becoming outmoded and *dépassé* – is evident from this as well as their other texts, and it was probably no less – if not more – potent than all the other factors in shaping their hostility towards their opponents.

The statements mentioned above were issued before the Shah's coup when Nuri and his followers were on the defensive. After the Shah ordered his violent coup which led to the bombardment and closure of the Majlis, he appointed a council of the state. The council which included a number of state dignitaries, Qajar noblemen, Nuri, Imam Jom'eh and other ulema of their persuasion, addressed a letter to the Shah begging him to disband "the public [*omumi*] consultative assembly" which it described as being "contradictory with the rules of Islam". The Shah wrote in the margin of the petition that "now that you have declared that the Majlis contradicts Islamic rules ... we too have decided totally against it,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 415–16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 416–17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 432–8.

and such a Majlis will not be heard of again, but – under the guidance of the Lord of the Time ... – we shall give the necessary orders for the extension of justice”.⁴⁹

It will appear from this as well as from what followed in practice that – whatever Nuri’s real convictions may have been, and despite his proclamations in favour of *mashruteh-ye mashru’eh* before the coup – he was all in favour of disbanding *mashruteh* itself as a price of preventing modernization. No wonder that the great *Maraji’* at Najaf, led by the formidable Akhund-e Khorasani, went on the offensive with unprecedented energy and vehemence.⁵⁰ And it was from these quarters that the reply to the theoretical statements of Nuri and his followers came.

Two articles written by a Najaf Mohtahed, Mohammad Isma‘il Gharavi-e Mahallati – and confirmed and countersigned, the first one by the Akhund, and the second one by him and Shaikh Abdullah Mazandarani (Hajj Mirza Hosain Najl-e Mirza Khalil-e Tehrani had recently died) may be seen as a direct reply to the views put out by Nuri and his associates quoted above, as well as a refutation of the arguments put forward by the Shah and his state council for abolishing constitutional government. The first and shorter article argues that the meaning of *mashruteh* is that the Shah and the government would be bound by written laws (*qavanin-e mazbut*), in contrast to *estebdadi* monarchy and government which means government based on the arbitrary (*khodsari*) “decisions, passions and whims” of the Shah. This system has been responsible for the country’s decline such that it is even in danger of losing its independence. Therefore “given the necessities and requirements of our time” there is no choice other than the election by the people of their representatives to establish laws within whose limits the Shah and the government would run the country’s affairs.⁵¹

The second article is much in the same spirit, but longer and more elaborate:

Statements have been put out in Tehran claiming that *mashruteh* and the existence of a popular consultative assembly contravene the Islamic faith and the rules of the Qur’an. As a result, the state has seized this false pretext and declared that what is against the Qur’an will never be established in the Islamic realm of Iran ... But those who are familiar with *mashruteh* and its implications realize that this slander and defamation is but a pretext for the destruction of the country and the abolition of the rights of the Muslim people. Otherwise, there is no conflict between Islam and the Qur’an, on the one hand, and the limitation of governmental power, on the other. This is in conflict only with personal interests [of the ruler] and is vehemently opposed to the destruction of the peoples’ lives, property and dignity.⁵²

The article goes on to elaborate these points, forcefully and at some length, until it produces a mature and sophisticated description of constitutional government which most of the contemporaries and later generations did not fully manage to absorb:

The meaning of freedom in constitutional states is not absolute licence, which would permit everyone to do what they like to the point of violating the lives, property and dignity of others. Such

⁴⁹ See, Nazem al-Islam-e Kermani, *Tarikh-e Bidari-ye Iraniyan*, pp. 241–3.

⁵⁰ See their numerous statements, their correspondence with the ulema in Iran, and their aggressive and uncompromising letters to the Shah himself in Kasravi’s *Tarikh-e Mashruteh* and Nazem al-Islam’s *Tarikh-e Bidari*. Here is a small sample from the latter (*Tarikh-e Bidari*, ii, p. 214) quoted from a telegram by Tehrani, Khorasani, and Mazandarani to Behbahani, Tabataba’i and Afzeh’i: “Now we openly declare [to all the armed forces] that following orders, and shooting at the people and the supporters of the Majlis is the same as taking orders from Yazid son of Mo’avia, and is a negation of Islam.”

⁵¹ See, *ibid.*, pp. 365–71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 365–7.

a thing has never existed and will never exist in any community of human beings, as it would result in none other than absolute disruption and general anarchy in the affairs of the people. On the contrary, the meaning of freedom is the liberty of the general public from arbitrary and unaccountable government by force, so that no powerful individual – i.e. the Shah – could use his power even against the least powerful member of the community, and impose anything on him except that which is permitted by the law of the land, and before which all the people – be they Shah or beggar – would be equal. And freedom in this sense is a rational precept and one of the pillars of the Islamic faith.⁵³

Two points are worthy of emphasis here: (a) the explicit definition of liberty as freedom from arbitrary rule, which – as will be argued below – was the interchangeable concept of both law and freedom implicitly held by all; and (b) the distinction between liberty and licence in a constitutional regime which, at least in practice, many if not most of those who were both for and against *mashruteh* did not make. Although no country-wide statistics are available, it would be hard to deny that the majority of the ulema and the faithful sided with constitutionalism even after Nuri raised his banner against the first Majlis. The role of the *Sayyedain* – Behbahani and Tabataba'i – in Tehran was very important, but the uncompromising defence of the Majlis and the constitution by the great ulema in Najaf was perhaps indispensable, especially after the Shah's coup against them. They went as far as describing Nuri as a *Mofsed*, adding that his activities and intervention in religious affairs were against Islamic law (*haram*).⁵⁴ And in response to the Shah's humble pleadings to them that he was not anti-constitutionalist, they wrote him increasingly hostile and aggressive letters which contained subtle hints at the possibility of declaring *jihad* against him.

Much space and arguments on the role of the ulema at the later stages of the struggle would be saved by posing the following hypothetical question: what would have been the consequences for the movement had the Najaf ulema – rather than giving total and unequivocal support to the constitutionalists in the civil war – issued a statement along the following lines?

As from now constitutionalism is haram and equal to waging war against The Imam of the Time.

Two aspects of the revisionist view of the Constitutional Revolution must be taken more seriously: the personal motives of some individuals among the constitutionalist ulema; and the general conception of the religious community and leadership of the meaning and implications of constitutionalism. It has been said that some religious leaders were self-seeking and even corrupt. No apologies whatever are intended, but it would be necessary to examine the material relevance of the issue itself. It is doubtful if many of the constitutionalists – divines, merchants, landlords or modern intellectuals – were completely selfless and puritanical in their personal motives, and that only some of those among the religious leaders of the movement were tainted with corrupt practices in the wider sense of the term. Through the French Revolution to the present time only Robespierre has earned the title of the Incorruptible as a leader of that great event, although his extreme perfectionism and puritanism had disastrous consequences for that revolution and its incorruptible leader. Not even Mirabeau and Danton – let alone the likes of Fouché and

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 367–71.

⁵⁴ For the full *fatwa*, see Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, p. 64.

Barras – managed to pass that test, though no one would deny that at least the former two were earnest in their revolutionary professions.⁵⁵

Humans are not – and do not become – either Good or Evil simply because they support one or the other side of a revolution. That has been determined already by their psychology and morality, whichever side they decide to be on. The *political* test is decided by the side on which they are found, not by probing deeply into their personal morals and values, although this would be pertinent for a further understanding of themselves and their political biography. To take up the example of an important non-religious constitutionalist leader, Malkam Khan has been charged with selfish and corrupt motivation.⁵⁶ The point however is that he chose not to be selfish and corrupt on the side of arbitrary rule.

As for the second point – that the religious leadership and community lacked a clear or even “correct” understanding of what constitutionalism would involve for the society – we are once again in a basically familiar situation in any such movement. In the English revolution and civil wars the vision of the Presbyterians for what was to replace the absolutist monarchy was different from that of the Independents, much as theirs was from the aspirations of the Levellers and the Diggers. Such conflicts of opinion were by no means unimportant or irrelevant; but they go beyond the fact that all of these parties were opposed to absolutist monarchy.⁵⁷ Much the same argument may be used in the case of the constitutional monarchist (Feuillants), the Federalist (Girondin), the Plain (centrist Jacobin) and the Mountain (left Jacobin) parties of the French Revolution.⁵⁸

The ulema of the Constitutional Revolution opposed arbitrary rule and were in favour of constitutional government for both practical and theoretical reasons which they seem to have understood well. But their vision of the future clearly was not the same as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani’s nationalist Europeanism, Taqizadeh’s radical democratic Europeanism, and Haidar Khan’s Marxist idealism. None of their visions ultimately stood the test of the time. And although there were misconceptions about law, freedom, constitutionalism, democracy and modernization, they were by no means unique to any particular group or party.

Constitutionalism and chaos

The constitution of 1906 did not end the ancient sense of alienation of the society from the state – of *mellat* from *dawlat*; it simply gave it a respectable legal definition and institutional dressing. This point has been discussed extensively in the author’s works cited in the references. Here, it is intended to show that the roots of the problem lay in the period before the complete triumph of the revolution itself, and that the civil war and even the fall

⁵⁵ See, for example, Ralph Korngold, *Robespierre* (London, 1937). Antonia Valentin, *Mirabeau, Voice of The Revolution* (London, 1948). Sir Llewelyn Woodward, *French Revolutions* (Oxford, 1965).

⁵⁶ See, Hamid Algar, *Mirza Malkam Khan, A Study in the History of Iranian Modernism* (Berkeley, 1973). Many contemporary sources are – at times highly – uncomplimentary about Malkam Khan’s ethics; see, for example, *Khaterat-e Ehtesham al-Saltaneh*. According to E’temad al-Saltaneh, Reuter had paid large bribes to Sepahsalar-e Qazvini and Malkam – among others – for obtaining the Reuter Concession. See, Javad Shaikholeslami, “Emtiyaz-e Este ‘mari-ye Reuter” in *Qatl-e Atabak va Shanzdah Maqaleh-ye Tahqiqi-ye Digar* (Tehran, 1367/1988).

⁵⁷ See, for example, C. V. Wedgewood, *The King’s Peace, 1637–1641* (London, 1955); *The King’s War, 1641–1647* (London, 1958); *The Trial of Charles I* (London, 1964). Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution* (London, 1955); *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (London, 1988).

⁵⁸ See, for example, the sources mentioned in note (55), above, as well as Leo Gershoy, *The Era of the French Revolution (1789–1799)* (Princeton, 1957); *From Despotism to Revolution* (New York, 1963).

of Mohammad Ali could have been avoided had there been a realistic understanding of European constitutionalism among all the main parties concerned.

Although it was seldom understood by any of the protagonists, their concepts of law and freedom – beyond an independent judiciary and responsible government – were different from those which had developed in Europe. In fact they were strongly influenced by the culture of the ancient arbitrary society itself. The original concept of freedom in Europe had meant freedom *from* law, including entrenched and apparently eradicable social traditions and customs. The “individualist” theories and movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were opposed to the extensive as well as discriminatory laws and traditions which governed the society and the economy. They were not opposed to law. They were against absolutist government and the extent of state interference in the society and economy, and were in favour of the individual’s right to the pursue of his own interest as well as equality before the law.⁵⁹ John Stuart Mill later formulated their concepts of law and freedom succinctly as the freedom to pursue one’s interest to the extent that it would not deprive others of the freedom to do the same.⁶⁰ Still later, Isaiah Berlin described their concept as “the negative concept of freedom”.⁶¹

The eventual triumph of the movements (in Europe) for negative freedom and politico-judicial equality before the law, exposed their limitations for the social and economic rights of the property-less classes, and led to demands for new laws – or social legislation – to protect their rights, and enable them, too, to benefit from the fruits of legal equality and individual freedom. Harold Laski later summarized their concept of liberty as the freedom to “realize one’s best self”.⁶² Still later, Berlin described their concept as “the positive concept of freedom”.⁶³ Both socialists and anarchists campaigned for it: the socialists, in different ways, tried to use the state, and the anarchists hoped to replace the state with popular administration, in pursuit of that goal.

Iran’s constitutionalists – and especially the radical democrats among them – saw no conflict between law and freedom. Indeed, they virtually identified one with the other because they saw them both as freedom, but also their concept of law was negative in so far as it meant the *removal*, rather than active application and imposition, of something else; that is, law meant the absence of arbitrary rule and little besides. In practical terms this was consistent with the ancient dialectic in Iranian society between *mellat* and *dawlat*, and the periodic cycle of arbitrary government – rebellion and chaos – arbitrary government throughout its history. Down to the present days such notions of freedom, democracy and law are still much the most dominant among Iranians both in and out of the country, and not least in the modern educated communities, including those who favour as well as those who dislike western democracy.⁶⁴

Once the constitution was granted and the Majlis elected, the confrontation was transferred from the streets, mosques and madressehs, sacred shrines and foreign legations to the first Majlis, for two inter-related reasons: the extensive powers which the constitution

⁵⁹ The most famous of them are some of the leading social contract theorists such as John Locke and liberal economists such as Adam Smith, David Hume and the French Physiocrats.

⁶⁰ See, in particular, his famous essay, *On Liberty* (London, 1938).

⁶¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford, 1959).

⁶² Harold Laski, *A Grammar of Politics* (London, 1963).

⁶³ See, Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

⁶⁴ See, Homa Katouzian, “*Demokrasi, Diktatori va mas’uliyat-e Mellat*” in *Estebdad, Demokrasi va Nehzat-e Melli*.

had granted to the legislature, leaving little for the task of governing the realm by the executive; and the persistence of the ancient suspicion and alienation between state and society. There still was no politics and therefore no room to compromise. The Majlis was literally described as “The Peoples’ House” (*Khaneh-ye Mellat*), and the implications of this for the relationship between the state and society were the same as had existed under arbitrary government. The state was still held with great suspicion as an alien force; and the popular understanding was that the Majlis was the countervailing power to the Executive whose only role and function was to carry out the wishes of the Majlis on both minor and major matters for running the country. In effect the Majlis was both the legislature and the executive, and the Executive was at best seen as the equivalent of a European civil service.

Yet the Majlis itself was divided among many irreconcilable trends and tendencies whose only common cause was to assert its right to total power. The only prominent and popular leader of the revolution whose motives could not be doubted and who grasped the problem well and spoke his mind openly about it was Abd al-Rahim Talebof. He declined his election to the first Majlis because he felt that the turn of events was different from that which a few enlightened intellectuals like himself had intended. After Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Qazvini (later Dehkhoda) had gone to Istanbul in the wake of the Shah’s coup, he wrote to Talebof seeking his assistance in resurrecting *Sur Esrafil* outside the country. Talebof reacted in anger and frustration to this revolutionary attitude and behaviour, although he was still emotionally sympathetic towards the sufferings of the revolutionaries:

I hope that Iranian emigrants would soon go back and, instead of fighting and killing, work along the line of moderation . . . It is wondrous that in Iran they are supposedly fighting for the freedom of thoughts and ideas and yet no-one cares about another person’s views, and if someone expresses [independent] views he would be treated as if he had committed a capital offence . . . And the charge is brought by those who . . . neither have intellect nor knowledge nor experience; all they have is guns.⁶⁵

Does Dehkhoda remember, he goes on to add, that Talebof had written to him wondering “what kind of animal is Tehran to be able to deliver a hundred and twenty [political] societies in a single night?”⁶⁶

I am seventy-one and have known Iran for fifty years. What lunatic would try to erect a building without the aid of a builder; what madman would call up a builder without providing the material; what insane person would expect a change of the Iranian regime overnight?⁶⁷

He goes on to ask what prophet could possibly put the country on the path of incredibly rapid progress that “Hosain the Clothier or Mohsen the Taylor” . . . were supposed to be doing.

The letter is long and very instructive about the clash of subjective ideals and objective realities almost in any revolution. But his words addressed to a Tabriz newspaper were more specifically applicable to the case of Iran, turned out to be prophetic, and reveal his instinctive insight into the working of not just the arbitrary *state* but the arbitrary *society* as well:

⁶⁵ See, Yahya Ariyanpur, *Az Saba ta Nima*, i (Tehran, 1351/1972), pp. 289–90.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Up until now Iran was captive to the double-horned bull of arbitrary government, but from now on – if it does not succeed in bringing order to itself – it will be struck by the thousand-horn ox of the rabble and the mob. I openly declare that I see this as being inevitable.⁶⁸

The assassination of Atabak is perhaps the clearest example of the refusal of both sides to compromise, that is, not to be satisfied with any outcome other than the complete elimination of the other side as a political force. The rejection of the principle of compromise is a clear sign of the persistence of *pre-politics* as discussed in the author's works cited in note (1) of the references to the present paper. On the one hand, it indicates a state of distrust between the conflicting parties; on the other hand, it shows their willingness either to win or to lose completely and at any cost. This has been a persistent pattern in twentieth century Iranian politics down to our own time when on almost every occasion compromise has been denounced as *sazeshkari* which is regarded as little short of surrender and betrayal.⁶⁹

The plot to assassinate Atabak has not yet been fully uncovered. Both the radicals and the Shah's men were around, in and out of the Majlis, on that fateful night. The balance of probability is that Abbas Aqa – the agent of the revolutionary Secret Committee (*Anjoman-e Ghaibi*) – fired at the chief minister, although it is not clear whether he then turned the gun on himself or was shot by his own comrades as part of a cover up. But there can be little doubt that both parties wanted Amin al-Sultan out of the way because any settlement reached by him – which was likely to have the backing of both Russia and Britain – would have been short of the maximum demands of either party. This was as true of the Shah as of Haidar Khan (Amu-oglu), the leading Secret Committee activist in making and throwing bombs; but it was also true of many who were a good deal less radical than them.⁷⁰ And it is not as if Atabak's survival would have seen the end of the problem even if he had managed to put a package together which the two uncompromising parties somehow would have felt obliged to accept, just as any agreement reached by Mosaddeq short of the ideal over the oil dispute would have been condemned as a sell out, and any compromise in the revolution of 1977–9 would have been described as a betrayal by bourgeois liberals, committed on the orders of their foreign masters, by most of those who

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁶⁹ See, Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London and New York, 1990); "Introduction" to *Musaddiq's Memoirs*, ed. Homa Katouzian (London, 1988); and *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*.

⁷⁰ Of the contemporary sources, Hajj Mokhber al-Saltaneh (*Khaterat va Khatarat*, and *Gozarsh-e Iran: Qajariyeh va Mashrutiyat*) believed that Atabak had been murdered by the Shah's hatchet men – Movaqqar al-Saltaneh, Mafakher al-Molk and Modabber al-Sultan – who were certainly around when the Majlis adjourned on that fateful night; Dawlat Abadi (*Hayat-e Yahya*, ii), points out that the Shah did not want Atabak and hints that he may have been planning to have him assassinated, but still believes that Abbas Aqa was the sole assailant; Nazem al-Islam, too (*Tarikh-e Bidari*, ii), says that Arshad al-Dawleh was intent on arranging Atabak's assassination on behalf of the Shah when Abbas Aqa relieved him of the task. Of the later historians, Kasravi (*Tarikh-e Mashruteh*) insists that it was the work of the young revolutionary and none other, although he too is aware of the Shah's dislike of Atabak; Shaikhholeslami ("*Majera-ye Qatl-e Atabak*" in *Qatl-e Atabak va Shanzdah Maqaleh-ye Tahqiqi-ye Digar*) also believes that it was the work of the young man and the secret committee behind him but emphasizes – along Nazem al-Islam's line – that the Shah, too, was intent on ridding himself of Atabak. The argument between him and Taqizadeh over this subject has been published in full, where the latter has emphatically and categorically denied any previous knowledge of the assassination of Atabak, and – somewhat unconvincingly – added that he even disapproved of it when it happened.

later criticized democratic leaders for accepting the leadership of the radicals despite their own grave misgivings.

Atabak was unpopular, and he was not trusted either by the constitutionalists or by the radicals. But there were others with much better credentials among political and revolutionary leaders who were trying to arrange a compromise along basic constitutionalist principles. Men like Mokhber al-Saltaneh, Naser al-Molk and Behbahani – even, to a lesser extent, Mostawfi al-Mamalek, Moshir al-Dawleh and Mo‘tamen al-Molk – still look dull, grey and even suspicious, in the annals of Iranian historiography, on account of their conciliatory attitudes and their attempts at forging a compromise, although there can be no doubt about their commitment to the general principles of constitutional government. The Shah did not want a compromise so long as he hoped to crush the movement; the radicals responded in like manner by attacking him and his family with unprintable verbal abuse, even to the point of publicly accusing his mother – daughter of Amir Nezam (Amir Kabir) – of highly promiscuous behaviour;⁷¹ and the crowds were, as usual, loud and hysterical.

And when at long last the Shah saw no alternative but to sue for a compromise solution before the battle of Tehran, the radicals would accept no accommodation short of his dismissal (*khal‘*) from the throne. Once again we may be reminded of events of an Iranian revolution which is much closer to living memory. Decades later, Taqizadeh had confided his deep regrets to a close friend for his insistence that there should be no solution short of the Shah’s dismissal at that historic moment. No wonder that he of all the commentators praised Behbahani – in his memoirs – in great admiration, especially emphasizing the latter’s political insight and courage.⁷²

Concluding remarks

The Constitutional Revolution was basically in the long line of historic revolts by the Iranian society against the ancient arbitrary state. To a different degree, all the urban classes participated in the revolution and not even a single social class (*qua*) fought against it. In this case, however, there was a specific and very important difference which was due to what had been learnt from the experience of Europe: the revolution was fought not just against a particular arbitrary regime but specifically against the arbitrary system itself; that is, for law and – what was meant to be almost the same thing – freedom.

⁷¹ To this author’s knowledge, the fact that the Shah was a maternal grandson of Amir Nezam-e Farahani (Amir Kabir) has been mentioned nowhere in the contemporary sources or in later historiography of the period. Kasravi (*Tarikh-e Mashruteh*) cites some evidence of the personal attacks on the Shah published in Sayyed Mohammad Reza Shirazi’s newspaper *Mosavat* (a direct translation of the French Revolution slogan *égalité*), and says that when the Shah turned to the courts for protection, Sayyed refused to answer the summons of the court and published a special issue making fun of it. Kasravi the moralist has the better of Kasravi the revolutionary when he comments (pp. 593–5) that “if some in the ranks of the freedom party deserved to be killed this man was the first among them”. He does however mention that not even *Sur Esrafil* was immune from this kind of transgression. For obscene personal attacks on the Shah see also Abdullah Mostawfi, *Sharh-e Zendegani-ye Man*, ii, p. 258.

⁷² See *Zendegi-ye Tufani-ye Taqizadeh*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran, 1368/1989). Taqizadeh probably did not know of the plan to assassinate Behbahani before the event, but it is not very likely that he regretted it when it happened. His own later development into a sophisticated modern politician earned him the suspicion and distrust of all the main parties, and that – as he had told Iraj Afshar in his old age – must have reminded him of his own radical idealism as a leader of the Constitutional Revolution.

As in previous Iranian revolts, it occurred when the state was very weak and the ruler feeble and incompetent so that the arbitrary government's minimum but vital traditional function of maintaining physical order and security was being rapidly eroded. Yet, despite its modern European trimmings, the consequences of the revolution were more in line with the traditional clash of *dawlat* and *mellat* – of unaccountable government and ungovernable society – so that neither side was prepared to reach a *modus vivendi* (let alone a *modus operandi*) along the lines of constitutional governments in Europe.

The result was a war of elimination in which the revolutionaries triumphed. But the age-old problem of rift between the government and the governed continued such that – among large sections of the society – *qanun* came to mean little but liberty, and liberty was seldom distinguished from licence. No wonder that constitutionalism did not last for more than fifteen years during which it looked increasingly unlikely that the country would last at all.