



Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906

Professor Ali Ansari

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'The year 1906 has been a very important epoch in Persian history, for it has brought with it the introduction of parliamentary institutions.'

Cecil Spring Rice to Edward Grey, January 1907

Awakening

The Iranians (Persians) entered the 19th Century following decades of political turmoil to be confronted by a new challenge: that of European imperialism. This was not so much a military threat as an ideological one insofar as the Europeans brought with them new ideas about political and economic organisation. The greatest immediate threat was posed by the Russian empire to the north, but it was the British in India who were to provide the most nuanced challenge to Iranian orthodoxies and to have a profound influence on Iranian reformers.

With their growing Indian empire, the British were well versed in the idioms and practices of the Persianate world, and unable and in many ways unwilling to exercise hard power in pursuit of their political aims, they developed a mastery of exerting soft power through political officers that could engage their Persian hosts in their own language.

Having initially sought a Persian alliance in the defence of India, the British soon realised that the Persian state was less of a threat or indeed asset in its own right, but potentially more dangerous as a cypher for the ambitions of other powers, principally the Russians. Their strategy therefore developed into one of ensuring that a stable Persian state – never too powerful in its own right – was nevertheless strong enough to resist the embrace of Russia.

While the Persians often found British policy contradictory and frustrating, they were soon attracted to British ideas of progress and political development, not least because British diplomats conveyed the view, that they had developed over time, that the Persians were neither socially nor ideologically ill-disposed to reform (many commented on their willingness and even enthusiasm to adapt to new ways), but the problems lay with their despotic form of government. Change this and all the other benefits will follow.

From the early 19th C onwards Persians would travel, albeit in small numbers, westwards visiting Britain and wiring their experiences and the lessons that might be learnt. They became enamoured with a thoroughly whiggish idea of progress and many joined a new international intellectual brotherhood – the Freemasons. Almost all the Constitutional Revolutionaries belonged to a single lodge, appropriately called the 'Iran Awakening' lodge.

By the middle of the 19th C, two further developments helped to drive the momentum towards change: a religious revolt, known as the Babi revolt (giving birth ultimately to the Bahai faith), which shattered religious orthodoxies and encouraged people to think anew and outside the box, and a war with Britain. Persia had lost two wars with Russia in the early 19th C leading to the loss of its Caucasian territories and the imposition of huge reparations. They had expected their defeat at the hands of Britain in 1857 to lead to a similar outcome. Much to their surprise the British, anxious to win the peace, imposed lenient terms. This was to further encourage the view of Britain as a partner in reform.

Limited reform had taken place in the early 1850s with the establishment of Iran's first technical college – mainly to provide scientific skills to the army – but its impact was limited. Indeed, despite a hunger for reform among members of the elite, the absence of a print culture or widespread literacy meant that many of these ideas took time to seed and grow. Moreover, the Shah proved especially obstinate to any reform that might limit his own powers. A decision appears to have been taken to focus on economic development as a catalyst for political reform avoiding the difficulties that direct political reform might engender.

This proved a mixed blessing insofar as the British government viewed any commercial arrangements to be private matters and they did not want to be too involved should they antagonise the Russians. Indeed, they intervened to stop concessions going forward which they thought might provoke the Russians including notoriously the Reuter's Concession of 1872 which Lord Curzon described as, 'the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished in history...'.

There were three critical concessions offered to the British, one saw the establishment of the Telegraph through India, but also now connecting key cities in Iran, the second by way of compensation to Reuter's, witnessed the establishment of the British Imperial Bank of Persia (with the right to issue notes) and the third in 1901 saw the establishment of the first truly industrial venture in Iran, the rights to exploit oil and the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. These were all to have long-term impacts on the country and the way it encountered the British – far from all positive. But it was a fourth attempted concession, to establish a monopoly on tobacco sales, directly undermining the livelihoods of many bazaars that generated consequential protest.

The Tobacco Boycott of 1891 which saw the issue of the first 'political' fatwa saw the rallying of three key groups against a British trade concession which even the FO considered dubious. The unity of the bazaar with the clergy and intellectuals forced the Shah to cancel the concession - at great cost to himself – and encouraged a belief among Persian reformers, that change might be possible. Certainly, the British academic Edward Browne believed this to be the moment that the Persian Awakening began.

Revolution

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The international context had however shifted with the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War – a defeat that was to reverberate around the world – and more particularly, the failure of the Russian Revolution of 1905 which saw many revolutionaries, especially those from the Caucasus flee to Iran. The defeat of autocratic Russia by an Asiatic power had a powerful effect on the burgeoning revolutionary movement in Iran and in a practical sense it meant that Russia was preoccupied with its own difficulties.

The protests that had started at the end of 1905 were nonetheless trivial if taken in isolation. The Belgian Customs officer, Monsieur Naus was seeking, as usual, to increase the state's revenues and had arrested and beaten a number of merchants. His efficiency was matched by his brusqueness and a number of other merchants protested by seeking sanctuary in the Royal Mosque. A sign that matters were taking a more serious turn was indicated by the fact that a number of senior Clerics chose to join the protestors. Matters became more heated when an elderly Seyyed (a descendent of the Prophet) decided to preach against the tyranny of the government persuading the government that they ought to send in troops to evict the protestors from the Mosque. The decision to inflict an additional beating on the Seyyed however fanned the flames further and the clerics decided to decamp from Tehran to the Shah Abdol-Azim shrine. This withdrawal of the clerics from the capital and the consequent withdrawal of normal service forced the Shah's

hand and eager to pacify the clergy he agreed in vague terms to their demands for a House of Justice.

The Shah then took the usual recourse of convening a council to look into the issue but having dispersed the protestors it was quite clear there was very little intention of pursuing their demands with any seriousness. This was to prove a miscalculation because the mood among activists had changed, and demands were becoming more uncompromising. People were thinking the unthinkable.

Little progress had nonetheless been made by May when the Shah had a paralytic stroke further debilitating the ability of the government to respond and in the Shah's place came the highly reactionary Minister of Court. By July another preacher (a Seyyed too) delivered an especially inflammatory speech leading to an attempt to have him arrested. The troops dispatched to do the task found themselves confronted by an angry crowd and were forced to retreat in some disarray after one officer in desperation (and panic) had shot a young activist. This violence led to an immediate escalation in the protests with further bloodshed leading to senior clerics demanding redress otherwise they would leave the city altogether. This was a far more serious escalation than the earlier departure to Shah Abdol-Azim.

What followed was one of the most remarkable events in modern Iranian history. Faced with the prospect that standard sanctuary in a mosque was no longer deemed practical or safe, a number of protestors approached the British Embassy compound at Golhak (the summer residence) where they encountered the British Charge D'Affaires, Evelyn Grant Duff, a more junior official in the absence of the Minister. These protestors asked whether they took sanctuary (bast) in the embassy the British would evict them. Grant Duff responded with the usual pleasantries that it was not the policy of HMG to interfere in domestic Persian politics. The protestors departed only to return a few days later and repeat the question. This time Grant Duff's response was more emollient noting that it would not be in his power to evict them. This was all they needed. In the two weeks following the 18th of July, some 14,000 people gathered on the grounds of the British embassy. It was an extraordinary gathering, perhaps every politically active male resident of Tehran (the population was unlikely to be above 250,000). Distrustful of the government they insisted that Grant Duff be their official interlocutor with the government. It was a remarkable turn of events.

By the end of the year, the Shah had issued the decree for the new constitution which would see for the first time a new constitutional order with a parliament, - limited suffrage – the separation of powers and legal limits on the power of the monarch.

Fallout: The Unfinished Revolution

It was at the moment of triumph of course that troubles began to mount. Despite the ambitions of the constitutionalists, the matter before them was quite new and, for many, there was a rude realisation that the work to reform and indeed revolutionise Persia would now begin. Parliament was not a panacea but a process and few people understood how to work it. Ideals and ambitions far exceeded the new order's ability to deliver not least because the basic tools of government did not exist. Ambitious plans remained just that.

Furthermore, parliament itself was poorly conceived with the weight of MPs balanced in favour of Tehran. This meant that the first parliament sat once it was quorate and without any due sensitivity to the provinces who were still processing their elections. People naturally differed on the details of the constitution and the role of Islam. Some clerics objected to the notion that sovereignty emanated from the people, reserving this to God alone, while others objected to the notion that they may need to raise taxes (and pay taxes) for many of the plans they had in mind.

Of more immediate seriousness was the return of the Russians to the fold who put their weight squarely behind that of the new Shah, Mohammad Ali, the crush this innovation once and for all. The revolutionaries enthusiastically looked to Britain only to discover that Britain, prioritising European defence had decided to settle its outstanding imperial disputes with Russia and signed a Convention in 1907 which saw Iran split into two spheres of influence. The Russian sphere included much of northern Iran and the significant urban

centres of Tehran and Tabriz. Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary was adamant that a détente with Russia was essential to contain Germany. Cecil Spring Rice, the British Minister in Tehran, made clear to Grey that Britain would be seen to have betrayed her Persian friends.

Ultimately the revolutionaries were able to beat back royal attempts not to suffocate the constitution, but it proved to be very much a Pyrrhic victory. Hampered by their inability to do anything constructive and the repression imposed by the Russians, the Constitutional Revolution stuttered to a halt. Principles had been established that were to have a profound effect on the Persian political landscape going forward, but the country entered the cauldron of the Great War in effective disarray.

Postscript

The experience of the Constitutional Revolution and the depredations of the Great War convinced Iranian intellectuals that they needed the means to implement change and that this could only be achieved through the services of an autocrat. Interrogating the European experience they concluded that what Persia needed to kick start the process of modernisation was an 'Enlightened Despot'. This was ultimately to emerge in the figure of Reza Khan (later Reza Shah), Persia's Peter the Great, the man who would enable the implementation of the plans envisaged by the Constitutionals. Unfortunately, he too, only managed to achieve part of the agenda laid out decades earlier. The revolution was to remain incomplete and unfinished, with a promise unfulfilled to this day.

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