A History of Islamic Societies

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Ira Lapidus
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Government reorganization in a decentralized country [Iran] was not adequate to make up for the inherent barriers to a strong central state. Intellectual reforms reached a small milieu of court officials and Western-educated Iranian journalists but did not touch the mass of the population. The reform program faltered because the rulers were themselves afraid that they might compromise their authority. Dependent on British and Russian help to maintain their regime, they had little incentive to strike out on their own. They found it difficult to raise money, and when they could raise it, being used to thinking of state revenues as a form of private property, were unable to use it in the public interest. Furthermore, tribal groups resisted centralization of military power. The `ulama' opposed secularization. The Russians hindered railway construction. In the face of such pressures, Qajar reforms were inadequate for the centralization of state power and insufficient to oppose foreign encroachment.

At the same time European intervention provoked resistance. Westernized intellectuals objected to the corruption of the regime and to their exclusion from power. Merchants and artisans, hurt by European competition and state-sponsored monopolies, and `ulama' , anxious over the rise of alien influences, were pushed into outright opposition to Qajar policies. The `ulama' became the leading opponents of foreign influence and of the state itself as a collaborator with foreign powers. As early as I826, the effort to establish a Western-type army regiment along Ottoman lines provoked `ulama' opposition, and in 1828 the Russian occupation of the Caucasus led to a nationwide agitation in favor of jihad. Muhammad Shah (1834-48) exacerbated the tension between the state and the `ulama' by pursuing a deliberately anti-`ulama' religious policy, and by continuing the effort to adopt Western methods of government and warfare. In 1840 he broke the power of Sayyid Muhammad Baqir in Isfahan. The centralization of state power threatened the `ulama' both as provincial notables and as religious leaders.

The tension between the state and the `ulama' rose higher in the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah under the ministry of Mirza Taqi Khan, Amir Kabir. The government tried to strengthen the state by limiting the jurisdiction of the `ulama' and by establishing new courts. It restricted the right of sanctuary in mosques and shrines, introduced measures to control endowments, reduced allowances, and sponsored the formation of secular schools in competition with `ulama' schools. The state also tried to abolish the ta`ziya.

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the `ulama' found themselves beset not only by the toughened attitude of the state, but by the rise of new religious movements. The yearning for religious certainty, inherent in

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Shi`ism, broke out again in the preaching of Sayyid `Ali Muhammad, who proclaimed that the believers were not in fact cut off from the hidden imam, but that there was always a human representative interpreting his will. In 1844 he declared himself to be that man, the Bab (gateway), and later proclaimed himself the true imam. This claim swept away the authority of the `ulama', whom he denounced as venal and corrupt servants of the state. Sayyid `Ali Muhammad further announced a new scripture, the Bayan, which superseded the Quran. His teachings included a powerful social message calling for justice, protection of property against taxes and confiscation, and freedom of trade and profit. He inspired rebellions in several Iranian provinces, but his movement was defeated and Sayyid `Ali Muhammad himself was killed in 1852. His followers divided into two groups. One group, called the Azalis, maintained their intense hostility to the Qajars and were active in the 1905 revolution. The second group followed Baha'ollah who in 1863 declared himself a prophet and founded the Bahá'í religion. From Bahá'ísm came a pacifist liberal outlook which would later appeal to elements of the Westernized business classes. The declaration of new religious authority was thus a way to generate modernized versions of Islam. For the `ulama', the only compensating development was the emergence of Shaykh Murtada Ansari as the sole marja`i-taqlid, or spiritual leader who requires the obedience of all Shi`a. For the first time the religious leadership was concentrated in a single person.

The tension between the state and the `ulama' came to a head over the De Reuter concessions. The concessions were bitterly opposed by the `ulama' as a sellout of Iranian interests to foreigners, and by the Russians as a sellout of Iran to the British. Under pressure they were canceled in 1873. The Reuter agitation foreshadowed the struggle over the tobacco monopoly conceded to a British company in 1890. In 1891 and 1892 a coalition of `ulama', merchants, liberal intellectuals, and officers led popular demonstrations and organized a national boycott of the tobacco monopoly. `Ulama'-led demonstrations were held in Shiraz, Isfahan, Tabriz, and Mashhad. A fatwa, or judicial opinion, issued by Mirza Husayn Shirazi, who had succeeded Shaykh Murtada, led to a nationwide boycott of tobacco products and the eventual dissolution of the monopoly. This opposition was motivated by financial concerns, ideological hostility to foreign intervention, and political interest in resisting the strengthening of the Qajar regime. The `ulama' were primarily opposed to the intrusion of foreigners, while the merchants were being reduced to the role of intermediary agents and brokers between foreign firms and the Iranian populace. The livelihood of Iranian artisans, cotton cloth makers, and weavers suffered drastically from foreign imports.

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The opposition of `ulama', merchants, and artisans was reinforced by the small stratum of Westernized intellectuals and Islamic modernist thinkers. Through secret societies, publications, and an extensive campaign of letter writing, they helped provoke and coordinate the resistance to the tobacco monopoly. This coalition merged the century-old hostility of the religious establishment with the opposition of middle-class merchants, artisans, officials, and intellectuals to create the first national resistance to the Qajar monarchy.

Peasant resistance, however, was minimal. In Iran, the middle-sized land-owning peasantry, which in many societies has been the basis of resistance to government oppression, was scarcely to be found. Most peasants were tenants and sharecroppers dependent upon their landlords. The isolation of the villages also prevented the development of class consciousness. The peasants of Iran were both too poor and too divided to participate in the insurrectionary movement.

The years between 1892 and 1905 were years of preparation for the culminating struggle between the state and the `ulama' - the constitutional crisis of 1905-11. While many `ulama' resumed collaboration with the Qajar monarchy, secret societies formed of intelligentsia, `ulama' , and merchants carried on an underground agitation. In these years, the traditional religious and economic objections to government policies were merged with constitutional ideas. The existence of European parliamentary states, the formation of the Russian Diet in 1905, and above all, the modernization of the Ottoman empire and Egypt inspired Iranians to rethink the political structure of their country. Liberal and revolutionary newspapers from Russian-held Transcaucasia, circulating in Iran, also helped to promote a new climate of opinion. Popular sovereignty, rule of law, and patriotism were advanced as the principles for a modernized Persian society. Akhund-Zadah (1812-78) proposed a liberal secular society. Malkum Khan (1833-1908), an Armenian converted to Islam and educated in Paris, who served most of his diplomatic and political career as an ambassador in Europe, published the newspaper Qanun in London to espouse a modernized Iranian society. Malkum Khan advocated a strong monarchy with an advisory assembly to undertake a program of Westernization and the introduction of a new system of education. He argued that reform was compatible with Islam. 'Abd al-Rahim Talibov (1834-1911), a merchant who lived much of his life in Russia, also propagandized for a constitutional government and civil freedoms.

The constitutionalist and modernizing reformers were joined by pan-Islamic agitators. Pan-Islamic thinkers presented their views in religious terms though their long-term goal was in fact to modernize Iran. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani

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and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani emphasized the political side of Islam as an anti-imperialist doctrine which would help revive national pride and mobilize Muslim peoples to resist Western interference. Liberal `ulama' such as Sayyid Muhammad Taba'taba'i also embraced a Western and secular concept of government.

The treatise called Admonition and Refinement of the People, written by Mirza Muhammad Husayn Na'ini, embodied the position of the liberal `ulama' . Limitations on the authority of the ruler, he argued, are essential to prevent despotism; the best mechanism for controlling rulers would be a national consultative assembly. However, the possible conflicts between Islamic views and Western concepts of constitutional political organization, secular law and Muslim law, equality of citizens and Muslim supremacy over non-Muslims, freedom of speech and the propagation of religious truth, were not explored. Liberal `ulama' adopted constitutionalism partly out of misunderstanding and partly for tactical reasons. Some of them confused the concept of constitutional assembly with the traditional Islamic notion of a court of justice. Others saw constitutionalism as a form of government which limited the power of the state and thereby reduced the prospects for oppression and tyranny. Some `ulama' saw in a constitutional form of government a way of institutionalizing their own authority and hoped to use parliament to gain a voice in the administration of the country. The confusion between constitutional government and traditional forms of consultation, and between institutions to enforce Islamic law and institutions of representative government, allowed the `ulama' to form a coalition with liberals and merchants opposed to the monarchy.

The constitutional agitation came to a head in 1905 and 1906. Tension due to the increasing indebtedness of the Shah to the Russians, Russian support for the Bahá'ís, and the appointment of a Belgian to the position of Minister of Post and Telegraph, led to protests in the bazaars. Public demands led in 1906 to the convening of a constituent national assembly. Of its members 26 percent were artisan leaders, 15 percent were merchants and 20 percent were `ulama' . The assembly, representing a coalition of `ulama', merchants and Westernized liberals, created the constitution which remained officially in force until 1979. The new constitution subordinated the Shah to a parliamentary government, but declared Islam to be the official religion of Iran. It committed the government to the enforcement of the Shari`a, and created a committee of `ulama' to evaluate the conformity of new legislation with Muslim law.

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