A Review of "**A History of Modern Iran**" Part I: Qajar Persia and Iran's Constitutional Revolution by Ervand Abrahamian

Parsa Rangriz

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1 The Qajar State

In the 19th century, European writers often portrayed the Qajars as despotic rulers. In reality, their authority was quite limited. The shah claimed to own all land but lacked both a centralized bureaucracy and a standing army. His influence rarely extended beyond the capital and depended heavily on powerful local figures. As scholar R. Sheikholeslami observed, the Qajars had "few government institutions worthy of the name."

Nicolò Machiavelli once distinguished between two types of monarchy: those ruled through loyal servants and those governed alongside powerful nobles. The Qajars fit the latter model. Like the French monarchy, they ruled in cooperation with hereditary elites, unlike the highly centralized Ottoman Empire.

The Qajars were a Turkic-speaking tribal confederation who took control of Iran in the late 1700s. They made Tehran their capital in 1786 and formally founded their dynasty in 1796. In the capital, the state was run by ministers, nobles, and accountants (*mostowfis*), many from established families with hereditary titles. Beyond Tehran, real power lay with local notables: tribal chiefs, landlords, merchants, and clerics. By the end of Nasser al-Din Shah's reign in 1896, the central government had just nine modest offices.

Ministries were dominated by old scribe families, some with roles dating back to the Safavids. With no regular salaries, these posts were often treated as property and passed down or sold. The Finance Ministry was the most organized, with offices across the country run by hereditary officials like the *Mostowfi al-Mamalek* family.

Each year during Nowruz (the Persian New Year), provincial governorships were auctioned off. The highest bidder received a royal decree and the right to collect taxes through a semi-feudal grant called a *tuyul*. These governors coordinated with local elites and hereditary accountants to collect taxes. As late as 1923, tax collection was still outsourced due to the weak state apparatus.

According to Lord Curzon, by the 1890s the government took in about 52.4 million qrans (roughly $8.2 million), 80% of which came from land taxes. Spending totaled 43 million qrans: 18 million on the army, 5 million on royal guards, and the rest on pensions, clerics, and officials. Only the Foreign Ministry had a full-time staff, with diplomats stationed in major world capitals and Iranian provinces.

The War Ministry claimed to have 200,000 troops, but fewer than 8,000 served in a real standing army. This included a 5,000-man artillery unit with outdated cannons and a 2,000-man Cossack Brigade, formed in 1879 and led by Russian officers. These troops were recruited from the Shahsevan tribe and Turkic-speaking immigrants from the Caucasus. Other forces included a small Bakhtiyari guard and private militias maintained by powerful governors like Prince Zill al-Sultan.

British diplomat J. Malcolm noted that legal affairs were mostly left to religious leaders, tribal chiefs, village elders, and guild heads. The shah retained symbolic control over capital punishment, which he used to stage public executions—often brutal displays of state power meant to intimidate, especially among tribal populations.

Newer ministries were also modest. A police force created in 1873 had only 460 officers by 1900. The Education Ministry focused on one modern high school, the *Dar al-Fonun*, which trained sons of the elite for civil and military service. It had just 300 students by 1900, mostly taught by French instructors.

In Nasser al-Din Shah's later years, six figures dominated court politics: his sons Muzaffar al-Din, Zill al-Sultan, and Kamran Mirza; the influential Amin al-Sultan (a former slave descendant); his rival Amin al-Dowleh; and Musher al-Dowleh, a liberal justice minister. These men controlled provinces, ministries, and sometimes the military.

To govern the provinces, the Qajars relied on local elites with their own power bases. Many were connected to the royal family by blood or marriage. Fath Ali Shah reportedly had over 1,000 wives and around 100 children, while his grandson Nasser al-Din Shah had a more modest 70 wives.

The Shi'i clergy (*ulama*) also held significant influence. As spiritual leaders (*marja'-e taqlid*), they advised followers on legal and ethical matters. They collected religious tithes and controlled vast religious endowments (*awqaf*), which funded mosques, schools, and seminaries. They also appointed judges and teachers, making the Shi'i clerical class financially independent from the state—unlike their Sunni counterparts.

To bolster legitimacy, Qajar rulers emphasized Shi'i symbolism. They took religious titles, made pilgrimages to major Shi'i shrines in Iran and Iraq, and patronized seminaries. They also sponsored *ta'ziyeh* plays during the month of Muharram, dramatizing the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in a style reminiscent of Christian passion plays. These performances strengthened communal identity but often included anti-Sunni rhetoric, which some senior clerics opposed.

With over 85% of the population Shi'i, these religious strategies were widely effective. Sunni minorities, under 10%, lived in border areas: Baluchis, Turkmans, some Kurds, and some Arabs. Non-Muslims made up less than 5% and included Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, all recognized as "People of the Book" with protected religious and legal rights.

The Bahais, however, lacked legal recognition. Emerging from the Babi movement in the 1840s, they were persecuted after a failed assassination attempt on the shah. The movement split into the quietist Bahais and the activist Azalis. Despite continued repression, their numbers may have reached up to 1 million by the late 1800s. Both groups remained underground and were accused by the state and clergy of being heretical and foreign-linked.

Finally, the Qajars tapped into Iran's ancient heritage. They revived pre-Islamic symbols, sponsored *Shahnameh* recitations, and adopted names and imagery from Iran's mythic and imperial past. They created a new national emblem—the Lion and Sun—combining pre-Islamic motifs with Imam Ali's sword. This emblem became a distinct national symbol, setting Iran apart from the Ottoman Crescent Moon.

2 Qajar Society

The Qajars governed not so much through religion and bureaucracy as through local notables. British diplomat Sir John Malcolm noted that although the shahs formally appointed tribal chiefs, governors, and town leaders, in practice they had to select men already respected" in their communities—just as members of corporation are in any English town."

Tribes made up roughly 25–30% of the population and included about fifteen major groups, or

ils, such as the Qajars, Kurds, Turkmans, Baluchis, Arabs, Qashqa'is, Bakhtiyaris, Lurs, Mamasanis, Boir Ahmadis, Hazaras, Shahsavans, Afshars, Timouris, and Khamsehs. While many were nomadic or semi-nomadic, others—like the Kurds and Arabs—were largely settled.

Some tribes, like the Qashqa'is, Bakhtiyaris, and Boir Ahmadis, were governed by paramount chiefs called *ilkhani*. Others had multiple *khans*, and different groups used different titles: Arabs had *sheikhs*, Kurds had *begs*, *aghas*, or *mirs*, and Baluchis, who traced their ancestry to the Prophet's uncle Hamza, referred to their leaders as *amirs*.

The peasantry, over half the population, were mostly sharecroppers. The annual crop was typically divided into five parts: for labor, land, oxen, seed, and irrigation. After the 1870 famine, labor shortages gave peasants some mobility and bargaining power. But with population growth in the 20th century, rural conditions worsened. By then, many peasants were heavily indebted and increasingly resembled bonded serfs.

Large landowners dominated many regions. Notables such as the Ashtiyanis, Vali Khan Sepahdar, Amir Alam of Sistan, Sheikh Khaz'al in Arabestan, Prince Zill al-Sultan in Isfahan and Fars, and various tribal leaders like the Qavam al-Mulk and Sowlat al-Dowleh controlled entire provinces. In western Azerbaijan, the Khans of Maku ruled since Safavid times and had evaded taxes throughout the Qajar era. In eastern Azerbaijan, the Moqadam family retained full control of Maragheh, occupying every major office. Their loyalty to the Qajars meant no central interference in their affairs, even amid campaigns against Kurdish rebels. Reform efforts under Nasser al-Din Shah had little impact in such autonomous zones.

Though the Crown Prince was seated in Tabriz, only eighty kilometers from Maragheh, the Moqadams continued to monopolize power throughout the 19th century—serving as governors, judges, tax collectors, troop commanders, and landlords. This autonomy was partly due to their early allegiance to the Qajars and the absence of direct central control. Like other regions outside Tehran, reforms had limited impact on their entrenched patrimonial rule.

Urban residents made up less than 20% of the population, living in thirty-six towns. These ranged from large centers like Tehran and Tabriz to small towns like Semnan and Kashan. Cities had distinct dialects, cuisines, and local identities. Many had once served as capitals. By the 20th century, regional histories highlighting local resistance to outsiders—whether Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Russians, or even central authorities—had become popular.

3 Roots of Iran's Constitutional Revolution

Iran's Constitutional Revolution began with high hopes but ended in disappointment. Early reformers eventually distanced themselves from politics, disavowing their past activism and seeking authoritarian leadership to restore order. They only began writing about the revolution decades later.

The revolution succeeded initially due to the Qajar regime's institutional weakness but ultimately failed for the same reason—it lacked the machinery to govern and reform effectively. Its origins lay in 19th-century Western penetration of Iran, which had two key effects.

First, Western encroachment united bazaars and clerics across regions, giving rise to a traditional middle class (*tabaqeh-e motavaseteh-e sunnati*) with shared grievances. Second, modern education fostered a new secular middle class—the *rowshanfekran* (enlightened thinkers)—inspired by European Enlightenment ideals rather than traditional Islamic or courtly literature.

This new class, led by figures like Ali Dehkhoda, coined or redefined political vocabulary: *mashruteh* (constitutionalism), *mellat* (nation), *vatan* (fatherland), *adalat* (justice), among others, reflecting a modern worldview and challenging existing power structures.

Iran's defeats by Russia and Britain in the 19th century led to humiliating treaties and territorial

losses. These powers gained deep influence in domestic politics, fostering the belief that foreign conspiracies dictated national affairs—a mindset that shaped Iranian political culture well into the 20th century.

The treaties also granted foreign powers sweeping commercial and legal privileges known as capitulations, which exempted them from tariffs, laws, and local restrictions. These concessions symbolized imperial arrogance and marked the start of deep Western economic penetration in Iran.

By 1800, Iran was largely isolated from the global economy. But by 1900, it was increasingly integrated—especially in the north, which exported agricultural goods and labor to Russia, and in the south, where provinces like Isfahan, Fars, and Kerman provided carpets, shawls, and opium to British markets.

Foreign interests followed this economic expansion. Russia focused on the Caspian port of Enzeli and its route to Tehran, while Britain prioritized trade routes from the Persian Gulf to Iran's southern cities. British enterprise flourished: in 1888, the Lynch Brothers began river transport on the Karun; in 1889, the British established the Imperial Bank of Persia. Russia responded with its own *Banque d'Escompte de Perse*.

The Qajars, aiming to curb foreign dominance, pursued a form of "defensive modernization." However, their reforms faltered due to chronic fiscal weakness, worsened by a sixfold increase in prices during the century. To generate revenue, the state resorted to selling concessions and foreign loans.

In 1872, Nasser al-Din Shah granted a sweeping concession to Baron Julius de Reuter, giving him rights over Iran's infrastructure and industry. Though revoked under pressure, it laid the groundwork for later oil concessions. In 1891, another monopoly—this time over tobacco sales—was granted to Major Talbot. This triggered a nationwide boycott, led by clerics and merchants, and was eventually canceled. The boycott foreshadowed the Constitutional Revolution.

Though major monopolies were reversed, smaller concessions proliferated. British firms secured rights to build infrastructure, operate banks, and drill for oil—leading to the 1901 D'Arcy Concession and the founding of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Meanwhile, Russia acquired rights over Caspian fisheries, oil drilling in the north, and transport networks. Belgians, seen as neutral, built rail lines, trams, and factories in Tehran.

The crown jewel of Qajar-era reforms was the *Dar al-Fanon* (Abode of Learning), established in 1852 to educate the sons of the nobility for government service. By 1900, it had developed into a full polytechnic institute with over 350 students. Top graduates were often sent abroad for further study, mainly to France and Belgium—countries selected to minimize British and Russian influence. The faculty, too, was predominantly European, largely French and Belgian.

At the turn of the century, the state expanded its educational efforts by opening new secondary schools in Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, along with five colleges affiliated with *Dar al-Fanon*, including two military academies and institutions for agriculture, political science, and foreign languages. These schools helped cultivate a new educated elite aligned with the goals of modernization.

Dar al-Fanon also housed a Government Printing Office that played a pivotal role in the dissemination of modern knowledge. By 1900, it had published more than 160 titles, including textbooks in medicine, military science, and languages, travelogues such as Nasser al-Din Shah's account of his European tour, abbreviated translations of Western classics and scientific works, and biographies of prominent European figures. This publishing initiative helped introduce modern science, political theory, and global history to Iranian readers for the first time on a significant scale.

During the late Qajar period, Iranian private entrepreneurs began establishing small-scale industrial and civic projects. They opened electrical plants in major cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, and Mashhad—where the shrine was notably lit with electric power—along with a sugar mill in Mazanderan, a silk factory in Gilan, a cotton mill in Tehran, and printing and paper-making

facilities in both Tehran and Isfahan. To shield local industries from foreign domination, many of these entrepreneurs formed stock companies specifically aimed at promoting domestic production. Their efforts extended beyond commerce; they also funded public libraries in Tehran and Tabriz and supported the establishment of ten secondary schools, including one dedicated to the education of girls.

4 Coming of the Revolution

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 had long-term roots in 19th-century grievances but was triggered by an immediate economic and political crisis in 1904–05. Facing bankruptcy and soaring inflation, the Qajar government turned once again to British and Russian banks for loans. In exchange, control of the customs system was handed to Belgian officials under Monsieur Naus, whose rumored ambitions and policies—such as raising tariffs on local merchants—sparked public resentment.

Economic hardship intensified. Bread prices rose by 90% and sugar by 33%, fueled by a poor harvest, a cholera outbreak, and disruptions to northern trade following the Russo-Japanese War. Protests erupted across Tehran, with women confronting officials and the governor responding by punishing prominent sugar merchants in a bid to deflect blame.

This unrest culminated in two major protest movements. In June 1906, three senior clerics—Sayyed Abdallah Behbehani, Sayyed Muhammad Tabatabai, and Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri—led hundreds of seminary students to the shrine city of Qom, threatening to relocate to Iraq unless the government addressed their demands, including the dismissal of Naus and the establishment of an *Adalat Khaneh* (House of Justice). Around the same time, Tehran merchants sought refuge in the British legation, setting up a sprawling protest encampment organized by guild elders and maintained with remarkable discipline.

The legation protest became a hub of political education. Intellectuals and students from the *Dar al-Fanon* lectured on constitutionalism and even republicanism. Protesters translated the Belgian constitution and circulated ideas of elected government. Financial support from wealthy merchants sustained the ongoing strike, turning the movement into a powerful force for change.

Ultimately, faced with widespread unrest, strike threats, and loss of military loyalty, the Qajar court relented. On August 5, 1906, Muzaffar al-Din Shah signed a royal decree authorizing elections for a national assembly. That date is now remembered as Constitutional Day in Iran, marking the formal birth of the country's constitutional movement.

5 The Constitution

Following the August 1906 royal decree, a Constituent Assembly met in Tehran to draft an electoral law for the new National Assembly. Delegates included merchants, clerics, guild leaders, and liberal notables—many identifying as members of the new intelligentsia. The law categorized voters into six social classes, excluding the working poor, and created a two-stage electoral process in the provinces. Tehran was allotted 96 seats, with the majority going to guilds, and elections were limited to Persian-speaking men over 25. Women's suffrage was not considered.

These developments unleashed a wave of political activity. Numerous associations and newspapers were formed. In the provinces, bazaar-led *anjumans* (regional councils) sprang up, while in Tehran, professional and ethnic groups formed societies—ranging from merchants and seminarians to Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Azerbaijani traders linked to socialist movements in the Caucasus. Press freedoms allowed papers like *Sur-e Israfil*, edited by Ali Dehkhoda, to circulate radical, satirical critiques of the upper classes and clergy in accessible Persian.

When the National Assembly opened in October 1906, it consisted primarily of merchants, clerics, landowners, and bureaucrats. Two informal political factions emerged: the *Mo'tadel* (Moderates), supported by senior clerics and traditional elites, and the *Azadikhah* (Liberals), led by progressive figures like Hassan Taqizadeh from Tabriz. The Liberals promoted Enlightenment ideas and modern science, drawing influence from European political thought and experiences abroad.

Together, these factions drafted Iran's first constitution—comprising the Fundamental and Supplementary Fundamental Laws—modeled largely on the Belgian constitution. Though Muzaffar al-Din Shah had initiated the process, his successor, Muhammad Ali Shah, attempted to curtail it. Nonetheless, the constitution laid out a separation of powers and recognized civil liberties such as free speech, due process, and equality before the law. It also formalized provincial assemblies and introduced the tricolor flag (green, white, and red) with the *Lion and Sun* emblem.

The constitution granted Islam—and particularly Shi'ism—a privileged status. Shi'ism was declared the official religion, cabinet posts were restricted to Shi'i Muslims, and the state retained power to censor "heretical" material. The judiciary was split between civil and religious courts, with clerics retaining authority over shari'a. Importantly, it called for a clerical Guardian Council to ensure that all legislation conformed to Islamic law—though this body would not be realized until the 1979 revolution.

The principal architect of the constitutional documents was Mirza Hussein Khan Musher al-Mulk (later Musher al-Dowleh), a Western-educated bureaucrat from a wealthy *mostowfi* family. Educated in Moscow and Paris, he played a key role in designing the electoral system, drafting the laws, and shaping the early institutions of the constitutional state.

6 Civil War

When Muhammad Ali Shah came to power in early 1907, he reluctantly accepted the constitutional laws. But over the following year, his position strengthened, culminating in a coup against the *Majles* in June 1908. This reversal was fueled by three key developments.

First, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 undermined Iran's sovereignty. Seeking to check Germany, Britain compromised with Russia by dividing Iran into spheres of influence. The north, including Isfahan, fell under Russian control; the southeast under British; and the rest became a neutral zone. Both powers agreed to use customs revenues—administered by Belgian officials—for debt repayment.

Second, the *Majles* alienated royalists by enacting reforms that curtailed traditional privileges. It transferred state lands to the finance ministry, curbed tax farming, and cut palace funding. Iconic symbols of court life, like the Drum Towers, were dismantled. These changes sparked backlash from conservative elites.

Third, radical proposals by Liberals intensified the conflict. They criticized the clergy, called for minority and women's rights, and argued that Islamic law (*shari'a*) had no bearing on modern state legislation (*qanun*). In response, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri broke with his clerical allies and sided with the shah. He denounced the Liberals as anarchists and accused minorities—especially Bahais and Armenians—of plotting to destroy Islam. His rhetoric drew large crowds, including students, the urban poor, and palace workers.

In June 1908, the shah acted. With funds secured through patronage, he rewarded the Cossack Brigade, declared martial law, and placed Tehran under the control of Colonel Liakhoff, a Russian officer. The *Majles* was bombarded, newspapers shut down, and opposition leaders arrested or executed. These events triggered a nationwide civil war.

The constitutionalist forces drew strength from several sources. Over a thousand volunteers,

including *mojaheds* and *fedayis*, rallied in defense of the *Majles*. They came from cities like Tabriz and Rasht, and from émigré communities in the Caucasus, organized by groups such as the Russian Social Democrats, the Armenian Dashnaks, and the Iranian Hemmat Party. Notable leaders included Yeprem Khan, an Armenian revolutionary exiled by the Tsar, and Sattar Khan and Baqer Khan, two *lutis* from Tabriz known for enforcing market justice.

Clerical legitimacy returned when three senior *mojtaheds* in Najaf denounced Sheikh Nuri and supported the constitutionalists. The Bakhtiyari tribal chiefs, persuaded by exiles in Paris, also joined the cause. Led by Sardar As'ad and Samsam al-Saltaneh, they captured Isfahan and marched on Tehran with a force of 12,000.

By July 1910, the revolutionaries entered Tehran. Muhammad Ali Shah fled to the Russian Legation and abdicated in return for exile and a pension. A Grand *Majles* was convened, deposing him in favor of his son Ahmad Shah, with Azud al-Mulk, a liberal Qajar noble, named regent.

The Grand *Majles* implemented key reforms. Colonel Liakhoff was retained to command the Cossacks, while Yeprem Khan became Tehran's police chief. A special tribunal was established to prosecute those responsible for the coup. Among those executed was Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, who was hanged in Cannon Square on the same charge he had once used against his opponents: "sowing corruption on earth."

The electoral system was democratized. Class- and occupation-based representation was abolished, and provincial constituencies gained more seats at Tehran's expense. Religious minorities—Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—were given formal representation. Voting age was lowered to 20, and property requirements were relaxed and eventually eliminated. By 1911, universal male suffrage had effectively arrived in Iran—far earlier than in many other nations.