

The role of nationalism in Iran during the 20th century

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ASMA ALI FARAH, JUN 30 2011

Nationalism may be best defined as “the attitude of a population which results in the members giving their supreme loyalty to a given nation”[1]. Evidently, no historical cause can be analysed without taking into consideration the circumstances that made it possible. In Iran, nationalism has to be understood in the context of increased foreign influence in the country’s internal affairs. Yet, nationalism in Iran cannot be taken as being exclusively anti-Western or anti-Imperialist, but it has to be looked in terms of the inner dynamics of Iranian culture because conflicts of class interests and the oppressive rule of autocrats significantly contributed to the rise of revolutionary movements[2]. Nevertheless, nationalism cannot offer an acceptable explanation for historical political developments because “men are motivated by many other considerations, and their allegiances are not exclusively directed to the nation-state”[3].

This essay will discuss the importance of nationalism in the change from a despotic regime to firstly a republican one and finally a theocratic one. It will also consider the impact of socio-economic changes within Iran which reduced the power of certain social groups and classes while increasing that of others. This is crucial because in the twentieth-century, particular groups such as the clergy and the Bazaaris were involved in a fierce power struggle with the central government in order to improve their position in Iranian politics.

In order to analyse the causes of the revolutions and uprisings in twentieth-century Iran, it is crucial to discuss how the socio-economic surroundings at the time interacted with the consciousness of the people because it was ultimately this interaction that led to the emergence of nationalistic sentiment. As Karl Marx rightly said, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, the social being that determines their consciousness”[4].

The chief issue in Iranian politics in the twentieth century – foreign interference in the country’s internal affairs – was deeply rooted in the Qajar area. Iran, due to her weakness, had been victim to the mounting pressure of foreign companies and individuals, particularly from Britain and Russia in her domestic affairs between 1800 and 1907. In 1873, the Shah made a significant concession to Baron de Reuter which gave him “the exclusive right of working the mines [...] of working coal, iron, copper and lead mines [...] of making and of working for seventy years, railways throughout the country”[5]. Moreover, in 1892, an accord was reached between Iran and Britain whereby the former would receive a £500,000 loan in exchange for giving the latter revenues raised from Farsistan and the Southern ports, in effect granting it unlimited rule over the ports of the Persian Gulf[6]. This concession-giving trend continued into the early twentieth century when the Iranian government was given two large Russian loans which were spent on wasteful trips to Europe and made a new customs and commercial agreement with that country[7]. However, it was precisely this new relationship that aroused revolutionary sentiments and later led to the Constitutional Revolution as the concessions and treaties made the Iranians believe that their country was being traded to foreigners. A merchant from Qazwin expressed this sentiment when he rhetorically asked:

“by what law do you sell these rights and privileges of our State to foreign adventurers? According to the Holy Law of Islam and the Law of all States, these commercial transactions are the rightful property of the people of this country. They are the means whereby and the capital whereon we subsist.”[8]

Yet, the foreign impact worsened throughout the years with Britain and Russia formally acknowledging their respective spheres of influence in Iran. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 created a Russian sphere in the north

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and a British one in the South[9]. To add insult to injury, during and after World War I, British and Russian troops occupied huge sections of Iran, indifferently infringing its autonomy and stated impartiality[10]. These developments damaged the sovereignty and esteem of Iran and many deemed it necessary for Iran to have a strong central administration that would be able to stand up to the West. This nationalist feeling contributed to the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the subsequent rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi. The poet Bahar spoke for many when he declared that:

“the existence of a strong centralized government is ... vital ...[it] is absolutely necessary for Iran's national survival.[11]”

Reza Shah seemed to be the ideal person for the role since he declared after his 1921 coup d'état:

“our aim is to establish a government that will not plunder the treasury. A strong government, that will create a powerful and respected army, because a strong army is the only means of saving the country from the miserable state of its affairs. We want to establish a government that will not be an instrument of foreign politics[12].”

Reza Shah established a Republic and during the formative years of his rule, his nationalistic programs won him support within Iran. Particularly popular were his attempt to avoid involvement with Britain and the USSR by refusing to award contract to British and Russian companies; his termination in 1928 of the remaining concession and Iran's newly asserted right to fix its customs duties[13].

However, the interference of the foreign powers by itself did not lead to the dissatisfaction with the previous regime; what is important to analyse is the way in which power was distributed and how this affected particular groups of society. Firstly, the Qajar government threatened the interests of the Bazaaris, the business class. Generally, for a business to develop and work properly, it needs to be able to influence the policies of the state[14]. Business people must be able to manipulate conditions in a manner that will suit their requirements, and normally, have adequate autonomy to be able to function as they wish[15]. However, the Bazaaris had very little influence on the market because of the strong pressure exerted by foreign powers. Moreover, without a democratic order, there were no legislations regulating custom duties and monetary facilities and no judiciary system that would resolve their problems satisfactorily[16]. Additionally, the Bazaaris had been disadvantaged by the British and Russian monopoly on many goods such as tobacco, tea and several industrial goods[17]. Consequently, the business class had a vested interest in ensuring the fall of the Qajars.

Secondly, the status of the clergy as well was threatened during the Qajar period. The Safavid Dynasty had made the Shi'ite sharia as the law of the monarchy and consequently, the ulama were given unqualified legal control over all business affairs such as all property transfers[18]. Under the early decades of Qajar Iran, the Ulama were able to remain independent of the state as they had their own economic resources which originated from taxes and vaqf (religious foundations)[19]. Yet the government's attempt to increase its share of the country's wealth alienated the ulama. The ulama were involved in commerce but the customs agreements made with the foreign powers – such as a new customs tariff on trade which was made with Russia and which favoured Russian goods – severely affected their trade[20]. Moreover, since the ulama occupied a formal religious position, their salaries and pensions were paid by the state, yet in 1904 a tax of ten per cent was introduced on salaries and pensions[21]. As Hardinge argued in that year, this new scheme was “most distasteful” to the ulama because they “have hitherto milked the state” and thus, “having grown up under this corrupt and gambling system, they have so adapted their methods to it, that any change in it confuses and alarms them”[22].

Similarly, the unpopularity of Reza Shah's Republican government can also be explained in terms of how his policies badly affected certain powerful interest groups such as the ulama. The Shah introduced reforms which gradually turned the country into secularism. For instance, he attempted to diminish the religious influence in the Ministry of Justice by substituting the clerical administrators with new employees that had received a European education[23]. In 1939-40, Sharia courts were eliminated and instead municipal and penal regulations based on the European model were created[24]. Furthermore, in 1941, the Shah instructed the Ministry of Education to run the vaqf lands and sell them to acquire the money needed for developing education[25]. These reforms were so strongly opposed that numerous clergy-led backlashes happened in the 1930s, such as in Mashad and Shiraz[26]. The Bazaaris were also

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harmful by the new Shah's regime. Indeed, his centralized capitalist rule hindered their prosperity and independence, especially in the province of Tabriz. As Conolly observed at the time:

"partly as a result of [...] government policy, the merchant class in Persia is practically ruined, and the activity of former great trading centers like Tabriz, Isfahan, and Sultanabad." [27]

Thus, the extremely centralized character of Reza Shah's rule meant that he failed to achieve the mass participation that would have granted his regime political legitimacy. This was an important factor that led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 because as Ghods argues, "revolutions occur when a portion of the citizenry is dissatisfied with their governments to the point where severe socio-political stress develops" [28]. Indeed, this revolution was initiated because the Shah and his son did not strengthen the long-established ties that had linked the realm with the business class and the clergy. Instead, a novel class structure was formed during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah and it was this new development that spurred the revolution. Thanks to increasing oil revenues, the government managed to raise substantial income which helped it to industrialize the country. The number of small workers increased from less than 1000 in 1953 to more than 7000 in 1977 while the number of large workers increased from 19 to 159 within the same period [29]. This expansion in industry increased the status of a new class – the urban proletariat. For instance, between 1953 and 1977, the urban working class grew from 300 000 to over 1.7 million [30]. Yet the expanded growth of modern industry challenged the Bazaaris in many ways: much of the small-scale manufacture which was located in the Bazaar started to see declining numbers of employees while the growth of modern urban shopping areas created substitutes to Bazaar food retailing. As for the ulama, the land reforms of the 1960s had a profound impact on their status and income: under a 1963 legislation, waqf lands were to be rent for 99 years to their farmers and this created a quarrel between them and the waqf officers who wanted to uphold the amount of income they received from the lands [31]. Moreover, non-ulema landowners were given the same rights as ulema ones and could now reorganize land thereby causing tensions in Azerbaijan where huge ulema landholding dated back to nineteenth-century purchases [32].

Therefore, since both the Bazaaris and the ulemas were losing their past economic and political interests, they formed a strong coalition which would help establish a new regime favourable to their needs. However, these two groups had strong historic ties. Traditionally, the Bazaaris were so feeble and small in size that they could not by themselves become a strong opposition group and consequently, they usually turned to the ulemas for political support [33]. The ulema in turn depended on the Bazaaris for financial support as the latter gave 20 per cent of their earnings to the clerics [34]. Thus, given the economic reliance of the Ulama on the Bazaaris, and the political control of the Ulama over the Bazaaris, they managed to establish a relatively strong coalition against the regime. For instance, the Ulama needed the Bazaaris to back protests against the state and to fund the coalition while the Bazaaris needed the Ulama's ideological cooperation against the Shah [35].

Yet although the strong alliance between the clergy and the Bazaar explains why a revolution was possible, the place of Islam in Iranian society explains why it successfully gained legitimacy. Twelver Shi'ism had been proclaimed Iran's state religion since A.D. 500 and according to this sect, religious and political power passed by inheritance from the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law Ali and his descendants, the imams [36]. Until the return of the twelfth imam, his desire was to be interpreted by the main religious figures [37]. The fact that Shi'ism has been engrained in Iranian society for such a long time ensured that the ulamas were able to give themselves an air of legitimacy that could not possibly be matched. Moreover, the Ulemas were traditionally one of the main channels through which popular grievances could be expressed: those who were victims of extortion by state officials turned to the ulemas for protection [38].

In conclusion, nationalism only really played a crucial role regarding foreign encroachment within the country. The desire to end this state of affairs was indeed a powerful uniting force that rallied everyone under the banner of nationalism. However, in analysing the political developments in Iran in the twentieth-century, it is important to appreciate the significance of class divisions in forging identities and how these interacted with successive governments. A particularly recurrent issue was the grievance of Iran's oldest class groups – the Bazaar and the Ulama – against the state and how the inability of consecutive regimes to accommodate their needs and preserve their long-established positions influenced them to form a successful and strong coalition which eventually managed

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to establish an administration of their own in 1979. Nevertheless, this coalition was able to initiate a new chapter in Iran's life because of the adherence of many Iranians to Shi'i Islam, an ideology they could recognize, because it helped garner support and subsequently legitimize their regime.

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