

Prelude to Political Parties in Iran

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Abstract: The main aim in this article is to deal with the origin and development of the party system's beginnings. The nature of the party as a general phenomenon, in order to set our discussion of the background to the development of parties in Iran in a comprehensible context. The party system within Iran had its origins in a series of prototype parties – the dawra, Band, Parti Bazi – which subsequently developed into the more structured anjuman, during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11. The nature of the material resources used in this research has a crucial bearing on the value and reliability of academic work in this particular field. The critiques offered here of preceding scholars hinges upon the limitations of their sources, and the contribution I hope to have made in this area depends upon a fuller and deeper exploration of all available literature and of previously unutilized oral information.

Keywords: prototype, origin, ban, fraksiyun, dawra, anjuman.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important features of the period under study is that Iranian policy was determined, and produced, by an interaction between the country's internal troubles and her external relations. The nineteenth century in Iran saw a deepening complexity of society which both reflected and effected a general growth of political awareness amongst the population.

DISCUSSION

Political diversity and development steadily increased during the whole period. It spans the years 1905-47, with two marked phases. Most historians of Iran regard the emergence of the first political parties as coming with the Constitutional Revolution in 1905-11, and this preliminary stage of political activity lasted until 1921, in which year Reza Shah came to power. The second stage centred on the years 1941-7, in this case following the abdication of Reza Shah. During this initial period, from 1905-21, the percentage of the politically aware was low, barely reaching 3%. Most of the so-called parties were outgrowths of traditional oligarchal patterns. They were slightly more structured, however, and possessed an explicit ideology that focused broadly on nationalism and liberal democracy. In the years 1906-8, and again in 1919-21, they served as agents of rapid political change, yet could not produce any leader of political acumen acute and sharp enough to sustain a stable party {or governmental structure}.

By the beginning of the twentieth century a popular awareness was beginning to grow that the ruling classes were „selling“ Iran to foreign powers, particularly to Russia and Britain through oil concessions. The ruling Qajar dynasty became increasingly weak and oppressive, and was almost totally obedient to the great powers. But the oppression under which peasants meantime trickle of migrants seeking work in Russia. But awareness also grew of the need for constitutional reform, and, as the necessary pressure on the government could not be brought by arties as we understand them, which had not yet developed, the struggle was finally won by anjumans which developed from dawras [Dawras in the of Form of Faramushkhanas {Freemason groups} frequently engaged in informal or clandestine activities that resulted in direct political influence.] and were supported by the Ulama, although a major part of the process took place in Azarbayjan. Part of the motive inspiring this movement was a desire to bring Iran into line with contemporary Western Europe. After the first World War, these anjumans began to grow into such parties as the Hizb-i Dimokrat and the Hizb-i Adalat, which rapidly developed popular political mobilization, but did not provide good conditions for forward-looking leadership unlike that of Reza Shah.

At this stage, Iran was in very bad order, facing economic disaster. The country was plagued by foreign intervention, for example the Anglo –Iranian agreement of 1919, which faced much internal opposition, and the situation within the country

worsened to the state that numerous revolutionary movements appeared but were negative and purely anti-Imperialist and were to physically dispartate to claim any robustness; however, the way was prepared for the defeat of the Qajar dynasty and the restraint of British interference.

These disorders communicated to Britain a manifest concern as a result of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, which Iranian revolutionaries were hoping in part to emulate. The 1921 coup d'état was the hope for prevention and Reza Khan, on his assumption of power, did bring some political stability to Iran. However, the freedom given to parties and unions was crushed, along with the independence and integrity of the tribes and ulama, when the Shah realized the threat which these same bodies could pose to his position.

The nature of the party structure is governed by three main factors: it is heavily influenced by environmental pressures – socio-economic conditions and political history.

The party system itself manifests itself in three main types: the single-party, two-party systems, or a multi-party structure.

The single-party system has usually been regarded as a new political structure that developed in the twentieth century, exemplified by the former regimes in Germany and Italy. This view is maintained, despite the fact that dictatorships – either a one-man or one-party rule – have been known throughout recorded history. The one-party system conforms closely to the needs of a dictatorship, yet it has its role in a democratic framework.

Two main types of single-party system exist – Fascist and communist, and these possess a clear doctrinal differentiation. Communist parties have been defined as “the tools of the proletariat to overthrow the authority of the middle classes”, in the other hand the Fascist parties as “the tools of the middle classes to retain their power, and prevent it falling into the hands of the proletariat”.

A typology of single-party system also be able to account for some single parties which are neither ideologically nor organizationally truly totalitarian – such as the Republican People's Party which ruled in Turkey between 1923 and 1946.

The two-party system is not monolithic within itself, a fact illustrated clearly in a comparison between the British and American patterns. In Britain, the party structure is usually highly centralized, particularly in the Labour Party. In the United States, on the other hand, there exists little organization beyond that of the

State, and the power of national leaders and committees is strictly regulated and controlled.

One of the possible causal factors in the formation of the earlier British and American parties is considered to be corruption within society [1].

A typology of the multi-party is somewhat difficult to establish, for the number of parties involved may range from three to a theoretical infinity, while there is an equally extensive variation within each of the parties individually. The tripartite system of France or Belgium, for example, show no common features, and there is little similarity between the quadri - partite systems of Scandinavia and Switzerland [2]. The case of Iran, however, differed in several respects. Iran's political system was simultaneously feudal and patrimonial, while its ideological legitimation was provided through Islam and tradition. No political parties as such appeared to lead the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, as had happened in Turkey, for example [3]. The political system was modified, however, through Iran's contact with European culture. Although traditional and modern systems inevitably overlap as adaptation takes place, the outstanding features of modern political institutions exist in the constitution, parliament and electoral process. These contrast with the traditionalist emphasis on monarchy, and when tradition is incorporated into the modern institution, the adoption of some of the modern nationalist goals, such as reform, modernization and industrialization, and can graft new authoritarian techniques on to the old ways of absolutism [4]).

Here again, Iran's political development is divergent, since it is connected with the causes of the Constitutional Revolution, and with the creation of the Majlis. Thus in Iran, two political groupings, the Democrats and the Moderates can lay some claim o the label 'party' [5].

We must, however, before considering these parties, refer to the political prototypes that preceded the parties proper, and upon which the latter were grouped. These include: party, band, dawra, fraksiyun, and anjuman.

Parti Bazi – a term that refers to individual petitioning of bureaucracy, military or security organizations, in order to achieve a stated aim [6].

Band – a collaboration of like-minded thinkers in a mutually supportive, though informally organized political group, usually named after one of its leading members, or families {e.g. Band-I Masudian}. Some of these cells were formed into minor parties, or fraksiyuns, but they were more commonly the antecedents of the political anjuman.

Dawra – a more stable party prototype . It comprised a small group of friend or relatives, numbering around 15, who met weekly or bi-weekly in members’ homes or at some designated place. Such groups were not mutually exclusive, but allowed for informal political discussion and co-operation, particularly during periods of political repression. The Dawra anticipated the anjuman, and also entered the common vocabulary as a legislative term after World War II [7]. The system through which Iranian politicians communicated with their ‘constituents’ paralleled its primary source of information the bazaar rumour. But whereas the Dawra was an upper class social habit, its members deriving primarily from the upper middle classes, the Dawra system referred to a structurally amorphous, indeterminate, and peculiarly Iranian mode of political activity [8].

Each Dawra member generally participated and was active in a least 2 or 3 other Dawras, and this allowed for rapid yet discreet transmission of the matters under discussion. These in to associates, and to customers , thus linking the elite with the population as a whole.

The Dawra system is deeply rooted in Iranian history, and the celebrated Khanigahs, for example, represent a type of continuous or permanent Dawra, comprising Darvish and Sufi leaders (9). Dawras could easily turn into political action groups, as in recent years, and the Khanigahs are known, too, for their political element. Moreover, Dawras in the form of Faramushkhanas {freemason groups} frequently engaged in informal or clandestine activities that resulted in direct political influence [10].

Whereas Freemasonry appears to have anticipated the formation of radical and liberal parties in Europe, especially in France and Belgium [11], the Dawra represents only one side of the “politics of informality” in Iran.

Fraksiyun – again deriving from the French , refs to the parliamentary faction system in Iran. Fraksiyuns varied in the cohesion and stability of their membership. Most were temporary groupings during one Majlis session, other were of longer duration. Some were associated with political parties outside the Majlis, and important political decisions have been made in fraksiyuns which Rizazadaye Shafaq [12] has termed ‘Shikastabastaha’ {those who shatter and regroup}, because of their undefined nature. Shafaq also refers to a system of “factions without parties”, in which groups do not have “any permanence or durability and live their short lives haphazardly”. This is not always the case, however, and Fraksiyun-ism may have a lasting result, as both Ibrahimiyani [13] and Makki [14] point out.

Anjuman [15] – the most structured and significant party prototype . Anjumans were societies or associations which existed to discuss social freedom and liberation from politically oppressive regimes. These two elements of discontent acted in the role of an absent ideology, together, along with the need felt for modernization [16].

The earliest attempt at uniting merchants and Ulama was made, with partial success, by Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi Afghani [17], who believed that the Ulama should support the Iranian people against the tyranny of the Shah. The consolidation of the anjumans, however, occurred towards the end of the reigns of Nasir al-Din Shah and Mzaffar al-Din Shah, and it was this factor which made the Constitutional Revolution a real possibility [18].

Secret societies such as these were generally unknown in the West, for they were modeled upon ancient Eastern societies [19], although several anjumans existed in France during this period. Early anjumans consisted primarily of revolutionary cells. Following the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, however, they developed very differently from other secret societies, becoming more open, increasing their membership, and openly communicating with each other.

Anjumans were of two types [20]: the provincial anjumans, and the ‘popular’ or political anjuman. The provincial anjumans {Anjuman-I Iyalati or Vilayati} were vigilant bodies which represented the Central Government, and supervised the provincial governors. Each Iyalat comprised twelve members, and each Vilayat six. Their duties included:

1. To decide the electoral and franchise rules.
2. To supervise provincial administration.
3. To answer complaints against governors.
4. To administer the revenue [21].

The political anjumans, which numbered over 100 in Tehran alone in the period immediately following the granting of the Constitution, had three purposes:

1. To strengthen the Constitution and to initiate reforms.
2. To watch over governmental actions and officials.
3. To appeal on behalf of individual citizens in cases of real or alleged injustice.

It is unrealistic in practice to distinguish between the two types of anjuman, for in fact, the provincial anjuman became ‘popular’, and acted as a central body to which the ‘political’ anjumans reported [22]. After the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 the political anjumans possessed the potential to develop into parties, and this was certainly their function at this stage. As their role and power increased, politicians of

many varied persuasions became involved with these types of structures; this then provided a link between the Majlis and the people, the latter easily influenced by the politicians. The anjumans were always prevented from becoming true parties by their lack of a coherent programme or ideology, and an almost total absence of national base [23]. Despite government opposition and suppression, from even the Shah himself, anjumans continued to form, as in the case of the Anjuman-I Muqaddas-I Milli {National Holy Association} of Isfahan, later known as the Anjuman-I Iyalati, which was set up in 1906. Various 'popular' anjumans were also established, including the Anjuman-I Tijarat {Trade society}, the Anjuman-I Taraqqi {progressive society}, and the Anjuman-I Ittihadyya {unions society}, formed by Isfahani theological students.

Anjumans were semi-political and semi-religious or messianic in character. The various Tabāqa {strata} had their own anjumans- the Shahzadigan, Tullab and Asnaf {princes society, theological student society & guilds society}, for example. There were also reactionary anjumans, including the Anjuman-I Varamin led by Iqbal al-Dawla, and the anjuman Futuhāt. Dawlatabadi claims that this last anjuman was created to disrupt the Anjuman-I Azarbayjan which was a revolutionary society [24]. These reactionary anjumans were principally formed to counter the activities of various revolutionary anjumans, such as the Anjuman-I Makhfi {secret society}, set up in February 1905/1322, and whose members { Devoted } demanded a Court of Justice and the establishment of the Majlis [25]. The best known members of this Anjuman were Sayyid Ziya Muhammad Tabataba'i Nazir al-Islam Kirmani and Mirza Aqa Isfahani, and its duties lay in supporting the Majlis, and overseeing the deputies. Kirmani [26] maintains that its primary function was to awaken the political awareness of the populace, and that it later became more radical. He also suggests that Sayyid Ziya's main aim was to form a Republic, although some politicians argued that Republicanism and Constitutionalism were not mutually exclusive, and supported either ideology.

Kirmani points out that this particular Anjuman was instrumental in bringing about the union of the two leading Mujtahids, Sayyid Abdullah-I Bihbahani and Sayyid Muhammad Tabatabai. Another anjuman, the Anjuman-I Makhfi-yi Sani {the second secret society}, was organized in Reza'iyyan in 1324/1906 to continue the activities of the former Anjuman. This Anjuman was led by Malikzada, the son of Sayyid Ziya Muhammad Tabatabai, who advocated a hard line [26]. Some of its members were from the Anjuman-I Makhfi, but the latter was less active than this Anjuman. It published a paper, Kawkab-dari, and secret missives, Shabnama; it had a Nizamnama, {manifest} and was paradoxically, simultaneously open and secretive, dominated by Kirmani. It amalgamated firstly with the

better organized Anjuman-I Ansar, and later with the Anjuman-I Junub {south society}, which consisted of Shirazis. At this point, its members decided to work for the welfare of the South [27].

The Anjuman-I Milli {national society} was a highly secret, 60-strong group set up in March 1905/1323 [28]. Its members included Malik al-Mutakallimin, Dawlatabadi and his brothers, and Aqa Mirza, a royal prince, as well as merchants, mujtahids {religious people}, guildsmen, bureaucrats, Zoroastrian communities and tribes. Its committee of 9, and a still smaller group of 5, sat weekly.

This revolutionary Anjuman sought to unite the scattered efforts of the many already existing Anjumans. Malik – Zada writes that this Anjuman sought the co-operation for the two chief mujtahids {Sayyid Abd Allah Bihbahani and Sayyid Muhammad Tabatabai}, and it is sometimes claimed to have had links with the Russian SOCIAL Democratic Party [29]. Malik – Zada claims that this Anjuman was very active in the Constitutional Revolution, and that it supported the struggle behind the scenes.

Several anjumans worked closely with the Azadikhahan, one of the most important being the Anjuman-I Azarbayjan, which had 2,962 members [30], and was located in Tehran. The Anjuman-I Azarbayjan was a significant force because of its connection with the Tabriz Anjuman and the Kumita-yi Inqilab-I {revolutionary committee} and also because of the policies of the Azerbaijani deputies. Its leader was Taqi-Zada.

The Anjuman-I Tabriz was established in 1906. According to Kasravi [31], the Tabrizis took sanctuary in the British Consulate in order to force Muhammad Ali Mirza to accept the Constitution, and upon leaving the Consulate, their leaders set up an anjuman. Its 20 members were promised the support and active co-operation of the Ulama. This Anjuman acted provincially and in Tabriz, and had a small core called the Markaz-I Ghaybi {Occult Center}. The Tabriz Anjuman soon began to show signs of a split between moderate and extreme factions, although the split never became final. Its activities included the editing of its own paper, and the organization of a large scale strike in Tabriz.

The Anjuman became important upon the demise of the Majlis, and at the same time increased in hostility towards the Shah. Dawlatabadi states that the anjumans picked and trained their members, and informed the Majlis that they could mobilize 2,000 armed men at any time. Eventually, the Majlis could not act without the approval of the Anjumans or the press. When the policies of the Shah became more aggressive, the people and the Anjumans wished to fight, but incurred

the disapproval of the deputies, who doubted the strength of the Nationalists [32]. The failure of the Majlis was probably due to the divisions among the deputies which were exploited by the Shah.

To summarize, then: the reason for the later development of the anjuman into a political party, was its organization, for it was the obvious prototype of a political party, especially during times of representative government, 1905-25, owed its genesis not to Iranian representation but to Russian and later Soviet influence. This was in the form of the Russian Social Democratic Party, which, unlike any other party, had its origins in Baku, before its influence extended to Iran and the organization began to take effect there.

CONCLUSION

Importantly, the end of the Third Majlis saw the final collapse of co-operation between the Moderates and Dimukrats parties, due to the collaboration of the former group with foreign powers. The Moderates were accused of treachery and betrayal of the nationalists in order to gain power over central government.

Concurrently with the rise of these parties, and in direct response to the presence of foreign powers in Iran and their influence over the central government, together with the economic decay within the country, a series of parties developed in Iran. Various Communist or nationalist according to the majority of historians, it may be maintained that all were in fact nationalist.

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