Iranians Experiences in Democracy: A Historical Study

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Abstract: Iran’s contemporary history begins with the constitutional period in 1906. This means that Iran, in spite of efforts by its intellectuals in the mid-19th century, was a little late in accepting the necessities of modern political life. The reason for this must be discussed elsewhere, but here this study wants to explain Iran’s experiences with democracy and one of internal obstacles to it in this 100-year period. In the period of contemporary Iran, at least five periods of democracy have been experienced: 1) the constitutional period; 2) the World War II period; 3) the period of oil nationalization in 1950-1953; 4) the period of Ali Amini’s prime ministership concurrent with the J.F. Kennedy presidency and land reform in Iran; and 5) the first years of the 1979 revolution. The reasons why democracy was suspended in these periods are somewhat similar and we can only discuss them briefly.

Keywords: Iran, Democracy, Constitutionalism, Land Reform, Political Parties

1. Introduction

In the period of contemporary Iran, at least five periods of democracy have been experienced: 1) the constitutional period; 2) the World War II period; 3) the period of oil nationalization in 1950-1953; 4) the period of Ali Amini’s prime ministership concurrent with the J.F. Kennedy presidency and land reform in Iran; and 5) the first years of the 1979 revolution. The reasons why democracy was suspended in these periods are somewhat similar and we can only discuss them briefly. A thorough study of this subject must be undertaken as a project whose outlines have been sketched out by relying on previously unpublished documents, journals and newspapers and oral and written materials from primary Sources.

In all five periods, the biggest problem for Iranian intellectuals was that they couldn’t use the opportunity they had to further Iran’s national interests. A characteristic of Iranians is egoism and a kind of political narcissism which is rooted in their individual characters. Because of the exaggerated emphasis on this topic, Iranians are aloof from social and civil ethics. These characteristics made it completely impossible for intellectuals to establish an understanding and dialogue in order to reach a consensus. In other words, Iranian intellectuals could never agree on the nation’s interests and whenever there was an opportunity for free expression, their demands required decades to carry out. Many of these demands did not apply to Iran’s cultural conditions and were considered extremist. For this reason, their implementation in Iran was impossible.

1. The experience of constitutionalism

During the constitutional period, Iran which was ruled by an arbitrary power, had been divided into two areas of influence by Russia and Britain in accordance with the 1907 agreement (1) and democracy seemed very fragile (2) Instead of uniting in the interests of the nation and controlling the despotism through the law, the intellectual forces in Iran wasted their time writing articles that provided a pretext for the traditional forces to mobilize people against them (3) During this time, rather than engaging in lawful activities, some groups and individuals resorted to terror (4) This was one of the biggest obstacles to achieving dialogue and establishing democracy in Iran (5). Intellectual groups would use guns to drive their rivals out of the picture. They even threw grenades at the Shah during a very sensitive time in Iran. In addition to these events, intellectuals would write articles that were unnecessary in those historical conditions. When the constitutionalists insulted people’s religious beliefs, the Shah, with the help of

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reactionary forces eliminated them. The press was shut down, and many leaders were jailed or executed. The only people who were safe were those who fled to Europe (6).

In the next period, when the constitution was again established, the intellectual forces in Iran spent their energy clashing with one another instead of uniting against their common enemy. During this time, intellectuals made many accusations against one another. At a time when the country was in a state of anarchy and needed calm, these groups battled with each other. There were many acts of terrorism and the democrat party, more than anyone, used terror as a weapon. During World War I, remnants of this group formed a terror squad and anarchy reached appoint that the masses longed for the despotism since they felt that at least then people’s lives had been safe (7). Thus, from 1925 to 1940, when Allied forces occupied Iran under the guise of preventing the spread of German influence, one of the most arbitrary governments ruled Iran as a constitutional government (8).

2. The case of WWII
During the World War II period, there was a historical opportunity for democracy in Iran. But once again, political groups who opposed each other began to quarrel and each of them, acting on behalf of another country’s special interests (9). In the midst of this, Iran’s national interests were ignored. In this period, many sorts of political groups and press appeared. The most important of the political parties was the communist party, named the Tudeh party, which was founded through assistances provided by the Soviet Union’s embassy (10). Instead of using democracy in Iran’s interest, the Tudeh party behaved as though it answered to Soviet citizens, not Iranians (11). Pressure groups supporting the despotism used this matter to question the intellectuals’ independence. The Tudeh party was also responsible for creating insecurity. The secret branch of this party used terror to destroy its opponents (12). This presented the necessary excuse for suspending democracy. At that time, Iran’s prime minister was a highly regarded statesman named Ahmad Qavam who was trying to limit the power wielded by Iran’s royal court (13).

Qavam, who was a policymaker sympathetic to the West, was vulnerable on two fronts: by conservative supporters of the court and by the forces who saw him as an agent of the West (14). This issue was responsible for weakening the central government. Finally, things reached a point that a man, who had served Iran a great deal, had used ingenious politics to oust the Soviet forces that supported dividing Iran, and could have paved the way for democracy in Iran was forced out of politics by the order of Shah. The conservative forces tied to the court played an important role in this process (15). They created the setting to force Qavam out of the scene.

3. The episode of oil nationalization
During the period of oil nationalization the conflict continued (16). The communist party, meaning the Tudeh party, created a daily crisis to benefit the Soviet Union (17). On the other hand, fascist parties that were an imitation of German and Italian parties and were supported by the court would engage in clashes with the communist party (18).

The legal government, which was supported by the people and had established an unparalleled level of democracy for Iran was open to attack in two ways: the Tudeh party considered it an agent of imperialism (19), and the traditional conservatives allied with the despotic government considered it an agent of communism (20). These two groups opposed the liberal government just as they opposed each other (21). They created confusion and riots in the streets of Tehran every day and even murdered one another (22). In many cases, innocent people were killed (23). The blame for these crises was placed on the prime minister who was not willing to suspend democracy even if his opponents entered the picture. In the 28-month rule of the Mosaddegh government, Iran was not safe from conflict for a single day. This provided the pretext for conservatives to suppress all democratic groups under the rubric of defeating communism. The conservatives contended that the Mosaddegh government was tolerating the Soviet Union’s growing influence in the country. Actually, the communist party of Iran, an ally of the Soviet Union, considered Mosaddegh to be an agent of the United States and UK (24).

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After a period of turmoil, and at a time when the Tudeh party and the liberal government were reaching a compromise—a very late one—the court’s allies and conservative groups abducted and killed Mossadegh’s police chief to illustrate the government’s incompetence. This act played a crucial part in creating public fear and weakening the Mossadegh government. In reality, Mossadegh was a liberal who was sympathetic to the West while the West never seriously supported him because of oil. The combination of these factors so weakened the government that this period of democracy vanished in the coup d’etat of August 19, 1953, and was followed by a wave of suppression, violence and executions (25).

4. Land reform and Democracy
The period of Dr. Amini’s prime ministership (1961-1962) was another opportunity for advancing democracy in Iran (26). The prime minister responsible for leading these reforms was clearly supported by the democratic government of John F. Kennedy (27). To advance democracy in Iran, Amini tried to implement land reform and weaken the landowners and conservative groups (28). But, Amini also had two enemies: the nationalists who considered him a foreign agent and the conservative groups who defended the royal dictatorship (29). Instead of supporting Amini’s reforms, the liberals harshly attacked him. Each day brought turmoil to the streets of Tehran. In one incident, Tehran University was attacked and allies of the court injured hundreds of students (30). Amini tried to lessen the power of the royal court, but because of the large opposition against him (31) and because he did not have his own political party or strong political backing, he was very vulnerable. In an agreement between the Shah and the Kennedy government, Amini was forced aside and repression swept over the country. When Amini fell, as in the constitutional period and the Mosaddegh period, all independent groups and allied of democracy were crushed.

5. The experience of Bazargan cabinet
Following the 1979 revolution, an unparalleled wave of political freedom swept over Iran (32). There was so much freedom that it resembled anarchy (33) during this important period, hundreds of political groups were formed. Most of these groups were Marxists, and all of them immediately opposed a government that saw itself as a protector of democracy (34). In every corner of Iran, there was secessionist groups' intent on breaking up Iran (35).

The universities were the scene of many conflicts between political groups who were against the liberal Bazargan government. In publications, the only thing that was ignored was Iran’s national interests. Political groups accused one another of spying for this or that country. In short, there was no plan for advancing democracy. Essentially, many of the political groups did not believe in democracy and considered freedom to be a bourgeois issue and a trick by capitalism (36).

Armed attacks and terrorism throughout the country prevented the growth of democracy and provided conservative groups with the excuse for killing the movement. These acts continued to the point that the liberal government fell. Several months later, all opposition groups were attacked, even legal ones (37).

Many of them disappeared forever. The only reason for this was that intellectual forces had no plans for the future of Iran. It is surprising astonishing that many of them considered democracy to be a joke and only realized the historic opportunity they had had after the liberal government fell (38). It was an opportunity that would not present itself again.

6. Conclusion
First, vulgar and ruffians have played an important role in creating public disorder in modern Iran (39). The conservative forces always mobilized these groups who frightened people in street fights. Second, improper interference by other countries played an important role in giving the conservatives an excuse to thwart democracy. Iran is a country whose people believe in conspiracy theories. Because of past interference by superpowers in Iran’s internal affairs, Iranians are always cynical about foreign influence. Conservative governments in Iran, who for many reasons preferred despotism to democracy, always sought to tie intellectual groups to foreign powers. In many cases there were ties and parties like the Tudeh party which openly supported the Soviet Union in its publications, on the right wing Toilers Party was
established by the financial and political assistance of US embassy in Tehran (40).

But, the real reason for suppressing democracy under the pretext that it was a product of foreign influence was the despotic government’s belief that the people’s wishes were unimportant. The claim that reformists who supported the social democratic movement were tied to foreign powers was false. In reality, no foreign government has worked to develop democracy in Iran. If there was a democratic movement, it was conceived by the Iranian independent people.

Iranians have experience with the fact that foreign governments' primary interest is their own economic interest. These countries were not interested in supporting democracy. The best examples of this are: the constitutional period, Ahmad Qavam premiership, the Mossadegh state, Dr. Amini episod and Mr. Bazargan's cabinet. Especially during the Amini period, the West put its interests ahead of Iran’s national interests. This is a reason for the cynicism of the statesmen and people of Iran who consider any foreign support to be a plot to undermine reform and democracy. In summary, foreign support in Iran is truly considered foreign interference in Iran’s internal matters and it is one of the reasons that democracy has been defeated in Iran.

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2. For understanding the details of this period see: Hossein Abadian: The Crisis of Constitutionality in Iran, (Tehran: PSRI, 2004).
3. Molla Naseriddin which was published in Baku beside Sour-e Esrafil, Mosavat, Rouhol-Ghodos in the first period of constitutional movement and Iran-e Now in second period have had a great role in tensions and caused the suspicious of clerics and common people against the values of democracy, really they thought democracy and freedom of expression means anarchy.
4. Tens of associations were created, the most important of them was The Association of Azerbaijan, it had a terror committee was fame as Committee Dehshat, dehshat means Horror.
6. This period famous as Minor Despotism.
7. The name of this terrorist group was "Punishment Committee" which was the armed force of the ramiform group from Democrat Party that was "Anti Organized Democrats", For details see: Hossein Abadian: Iran from World War 1 to the February Coup of 1921, (Tehran: PSRI, 1995).
11. For example the Tudeh Party demonstration for protecting Russian demands for North Oil of Iran can be mentioned, See: Mardom Baraye Roshanfelekran, No. 12, November 10/ 1943, "the Oil Question", written by Ehsan Tabari.
14. Mozaffar Bagha'ee, Abbas Mas'udi and most important Shah, were the main opponents of Qavam on right wing and the leaders of Tudeh Party were his main opponents on the left wing.
15. See; the Biography of Dr. Mozaffar Bagha'ee, pp. 70-71.
17. The hands of conservative groups and royal court could be found in these tensions, if fact these currents misused the situation for the benefit of Shah and the opponents of Oil Nationalization. For an example see: F. M. Javanshir: The Experience of August 19th [1953], (Tehran: Tudeh Publication, 1980), pp. 132-144.
18. The main fascist Parties were Sumka (Socialism Melli Kargaran-e Iran) led by Davoud Monshi Zadeh, Arya which was leaded by army generals such as Gen. Hassan Arfa', Pan Iranianist Party that it’s leader was Mohsen Pezeshkpour then selected as a parliament member in 1970s and in some measure Toilers Party of Mozaffar Bagha'ee. All of those were opponents both with Mosadegh and Tudeh Party and were supported by royal court.
19. For instance see: Shaja't (the main newspaper of Tudeh Party), No. 1, 17/July/ 1951, p. 1.
20. According to Iranian documents the hands of Toilers Party was visible in street tensions and under the slogans such as preventing Communism, this party spread anarchy in Tehran University, factories and streets of main cities especially Tehran, see: Biography of Mozaffar Bagha'ee, pp. 200-204, 222-224, 260, 265-284.
21. After the revolution of 1979, Tudeh Party claimed it has been a pro-Mosadegh party during the years of Oil Nationalization, see: Rasoul Mehraban: Some Aspects of Iran Contemporary History, (Tehran: Unknown Publisher, 1982).
22. One of the most political murders, was the case of Brigadier Afshar Tous kidnaping the Commander of Police at the mid of April 1953 and his wild killing in North Eastern suburbs of Tehran. For details see: Mohammad Torkaman: Documents around the Plot of Kidnapping and Killing of Major General Afshar Tous, (Tehran: Rasa, 1983).
23. Details have been mentioned in: Mohammad Torkaman: Tensions, Street Clashes and Plots in the period of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh Government, (Tehran: Rasa, 1980).

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29. National Front of Iran was the main opposition of Amini, also Army Generals, Landowners and conservative opponents of reforms could be mentioned as the main enemies of him.
31. The conservatist persons such as Seyyed Ja'far Behbahani, Fathollah Foroud, Rashidian brothers, Abolhassan Ebathej and even General Teimour Bakhtiar the chief of Iran Intelligence Service fame as SAVAK have had a great role in making tensions: Mehdi Azar: Regarding the Memory of Saleh, Ayande Journal, vol. 14, No. 9-12.
32. At that time tens of Political Parties, Labor Syndicates, student groups and hundreds of newspapers, periodicals, journals, weekly and monthly journals in addition annuals were active. All leftist groups were free for their propaganda.
33. Khuzestan, Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, Torkaman Sahra and northern Iran beside all of universities and even schools were under tensions.
34. The great leftist parties such as Tudeh Party and Ranjbaran Party that was a ramification from Tudeh Party were active for the benefit of USSR and China.
35. For example the "'Arab People Front" can be mentioned which was a separatist group and was active in Khuzestan.
36. Both Islamic and Marxist leftist groups considered democracy as a western trick to protect their benefits in Iran and struggling against working groups or Proletariat Dictatorship.
37. For understanding Bazargan's viewpoint on Iran revolution see: Iranian Revolution in two Motion, (Tehran: Iran Freedom Movement, 1984), pp. 165-204.
38. The confuse situation of Iran since 11/ February/ 1979 up to 7/ November/ 1979 according to Bazargan can be find in: The Problem and Questions of Revolution in its first Year, (Tehran: Iran Freedom Movement, 1983).

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