

Iranian constitutional revolution: British and Russian empire roles

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Abstract: Iranian Constitutional Revolution was one of the most important developments in the East in the early twentieth century. This revolution made one of the oldest dictatorship regimes, the absolute monarchy to change into a constitutional government. In this movement, the national bourgeoisie, the liberal landowners, the Shiite progressive clergy and the urban laboring masses as well as a thin layer of proletariat struck a fragile coalition with different motives and led the movement to victory. Since the peasants constituted a vast majority of the Iranian society at that time, the absence of this class in the revolution could be considered as the greatest weakness of the movement. The present research explains the role of the governments of Britain and Russia in the revolution as well as the objective and subjective factors causing it. This study attempts to use the data obtained from sources, including books and research papers.

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1. Introduction

The bourgeoisie-democratic constitutional movement made fundamental changes in the Iranians' minds and the political structure in Iran. This belief that the king is the shadow of God on the earth was replaced by the principle of government accountability, the need for parliament and the government regulatory institutions, independent judiciary, political parties, political pluralism and country modernization. Political and social classes each participated in the movement with different motives and finally led the anti-imperialist revolution to the victory by creating a broad people front.

In the meanwhile, the governments of the Tsarist Russia and the Great Britain played prominent roles in the movement as the influencing powers on the country and the rival imperialists. The leading Iranian, Russian and Western researchers have created valuable works in this regard. Professor Mikhail Sergovitch Ivanov investigates this issue from a classification perspective in his books "the history of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution" and also "the modern history of Iran". Taqi Shahin, an Azerbaijani Marxist along with the Iranian Marxists like Bijan Jazani and Baqer Momeni investigated the thirty-year history of Iran and the history of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution from the Marxist perspective in their works such as "the history of the Communist Party of Iran". The Western historians such as Ervand Abrahamian, Nikki R. Keddie and Dilip Hiro investigated this issue through a Western non-Marxist approach in their books such as, "Iran

between two revolutions", "the roots of the Iranian revolution" and "Iran under the Ayatollas". Additionally, the valuable books considering the constitutional history written by Dr. Fereydoon Adameyat and Ahmad Kasravi can be mentioned in which a detailed narrative and description is presented of the events during the Constitutional Revolution.

The main issues studied in the present research are the objective and subjective causes of the Constitutional Revolution, the role of the social and economic classes in the movement as well as the role of the governments of the Great Britain and Russia in the movement, the causes of the revolution failure and the reestablishment of the dictatorship. In fact, our research intends to have a comprehensive review of this issue through studying books, articles and journal.

The main hypothesis of this article is both internal and external developments in the 19th and early 20th specially Russian constitutional revolution and Acquaintance with European new ideas caused Iranian constitutional revolution.

Research wants to answer this question that what are the subjective and objective reasons of and role of Russian and British empires in Iranian constitutional revolution.

The aim of the present research is to study the Iranian Constitutional Revolution as the first bourgeois-democratic revolution in the Middle East which has inspired many democratic and anti-imperialist movements in the region.

Iran in the 19th

At the beginning of the 19th century, Iran fought with Russian empires twice and lost in both of them. According to two peace treaties, Iran lost whole of its territories in Caucasus, without having war ships in the Caspian Sea and had to accept the capitulation. In addition, Russian empire imposed heavy compensation on Iranian government. Aggressive Russian imperialism, backward feudalism mode of production and cruelty to Caucasian Christians from Iranian central government especially in Georgia and Armenia caused Iran to lose these wars. (1804 – 1813 and 1825 – 1828, the worst part of Turkmenchay peace treaty (first peace treaty is called Golistan) was to support Iranian viceroy (Abbas Mirza) and his posterity kingdom by Russian tsarist. Because of this principle, Russian empire could interfere at the highest level with Iranian national sovereignty. In 1857, Iran fought with the United Kingdom on Herat (the city which is located currently in Afghanistan) and tried to restore its sovereignty. However, the Great Britain ultimatum to Iranian central government was to ask to leave Herat. In addition, British navy bombarded Iranian southern ports and Islands in the Persian Gulf. British troops marched in Iranian land and threatened the country's integrity, independency and national sovereignty. Because of these explanations, Iran had to accept British peace treaty suggestion. According to this agreement (Paris peace treaty), Iran should evacuate Herat and recognized Afghanistan independency. In addition, Iran committed not to interfere with Afghanistan internal affairs and accepted British mediation in disputes with this country. Finally, British could access to the whole of economic and political advantages which were granted to Russian empire according to Turkmenchay peace treaty (Houshang Mahdavi, 2013:248-251; Abrahamian, 2012: 66; Madani, 1984: 18-19).

Some years later, Iran granted these political and economic advantages to all of European governments according to principle of most favored nation. Therefore, Iranian independency, national sovereignty and territorial integrity was lost practically. In general, British empire's policy in the 19th century about Iran based on this principle showed that Iranian independency and integrity should be protected, while it should be remained weak. Because they wanted to use Iran as a buffer zone between Russian empire and their ring of colonies (India).

This policy was pursued with greater intensity when Russians occupied central Asia and marched to Afghanistan. According to Akhal treaty (September 21 1881) between Iranian Pro-Russian foreign minister and his Russian counterpart, Iran accepted the whole annexation of its territory in the central Asia for the Russian empire. In return, Russians

committed to protect Iranian northern eastern borders and prevented attacking savage tribes to Iranian eastern province (Khorasan). In addition, both countries agreed to decrease Russian commodities custom duties from 5% to 1.5% (Houshang Mahdavi, 2013: 255-256).

In 1885, British military official, General Goldsmith was appointed as a mediator to solve Iranian and Afghanistan disputes over Baluchistan issue. According to agreement, Iran lost most parts of its territory in eastern province of Baluchistan. All of these developments caused Iranian political and economic weakness dramatically in the 19th century.

The effects of imperialistic concessions and colonial loans

According to explanation and facts, it can be concluded the concessions and loans had imperialistic nature. In addition, the influx of foreign capitals, and loans caused Iranian domestic products and industries not to compete with Russian, British, German and other European goods and faced with bankruptcy. Iranian national bourgeoisies went bankrupt and thousands Iranian labors lost their jobs and became unemployed. The reason was that they had to immigrate to India, Ottoman Empire or especially Russian empire. In these countries, they were familiar with radical progressive ideas such as liberalism, socialism, and Marxism. Besides, both Iranian national and commercial bourgeoisie were dissatisfied with Qajar dynasty. Because they maintained that royal regime didn't protect their interests against their European counterparts. In the 19th century after consecutive defeats from European powers (Russian and British empires), losing vast parts of territory and imposing harmful trade treaties. Some Qajar princes and chancellors tried to do radical reforms in economic, political and social affairs. They sent Iranian students to Europe to learn modern sciences like chemistry, physics, medicines and foreign languages.

Some of the reformist chancellors tried to develop the country. They sent some Iranian as students to Europe to learn modern sciences such as chemistry, physics, medicine and foreign languages. In these societies, Iranian students (also intellectuals and merchants) faced with something like democracy, Parliament, freedom of speech, worship, press, journals and newspapers, the principle of ruling law, constitution, republicanism and new ideas. In addition, they saw railways, universities, colleges, schools, industries, factories, huge ships, steam engines and other modern civilization symbols. Naturally, these classes (petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, etc.) demanded democracy and modernism in their country.

A new phenomenon in Iranian political atmosphere the 19th century can be considered. Some Iranian dissidents published newspapers in Europe, India and Ottoman empire which wrote against – governmental oppressions, corruption, embezzlement, and inefficiency. They wanted modernity, economic development, freedom of speech, ruling law, democracy, equality, independent judicial branch, and parliament. Some of the most famous of these newspapers are Ghanoon (law), Akhtar (star) and Hab al Matin (tight trope).

Another class which were dissatisfied with Qajar kingdom was Shiite clergy. Because of the limited process of secularization in the second half of nineteenth century, they lost some of their powers in judicial and educational sections. In addition, the transferring of some modern and European civilization via investment of western companies worried them. Because of these facts, they decided to regain their powers and struggled against Qajar dynasty.

On the other hand, imposed trade treaties because of Iranian losing wars from European, caused Iranian government not only support Iranian merchants but also discriminated in favor of their western counterparts. For example, Iranian merchants had to pay too much taxes, while European business men were exempted totally. In addition, Western merchants had the right of movement and business freedom in Iranian territory.

At that time, feudalism was a predominate mode of production in Iran. Nearly 70% Iranian was farmers and peasants. They were exploited harshly by feudal and great land owners. Most of Iranian farmers lived under superstitious, ignorance and poverty. Because of political, social and economic developments noted before, Iranian society needed to transfer feudalism phase to capitalism specially after the acquaintance with modern European ideas, values and developments. In addition, liberal land lords wanted to play more effectively in Iranian political sphere. All of these social groups had enough motivations to unite with each other against Qajar dynasty because of their political, economic and social interests.

Russian – Japan war and Russian constructional relation

In 1904, Japan could defeat Russian empire army, in Manchuria wars (current china) because of annexation of this area according to the imperialistic greed. This news quickly spread among Iranian society and had special effects on Iranian activists, and intellectuals in addition to various social classes and so they felt humiliated. Nevertheless, they were given motivation, because they thought while small country like Japan can defeat one of the most powerful European army such as Russia, then there

isn't any logical reasons that they can not change into strong and developed country like Japan.

Russian constitutional revolution

In 1905, just a year after they lost the war from Japan, constitutional revolution happened in Russia. This event had a dramatic influence on Iranian society. First, although Russian political system was much more progressive than Iran, both of them were dictators. Second, Russian empire was the main supporter of Qajar dynasty, because its weakness was on benefit of Iranian revolutionary forces. Third, both Iranian and Russian revolutionary groups had mutual relationship with each other. Because of this, Russian and Caucasian radical, progressive and socialist forces helped Iranian constitutionalists with giving weapons and human forces, especially in northern Iranian provinces Azerbaijan. All of these factors caused Russian Tsar to encourage Iranian Shah to suppress Iranian liberation movement.

The roles and stances of Great European powers (Russian and British empires about Iranian constitutional revolution)

As it was noted previously, Russian opposed to constitutional revolutions in Russia and Iran. The reason is that the nature of two regimes were dictators. In addition, both countries revolutionary forces had bilateral relations. In return, British supported Iranian revolution, because this movement was anti-Russian and the majority of constitutionalists and Iranian intellectuals were pro-British. Therefore, British could increase its influences on Iran. Finally, they had parliamentary and constitutional political regime. All of these factors caused the Great Britain to support Iranian liberation movement in the early phase of the movement. While when movement became radical and deepened, British helped the Russians to suppress the revolution practically.

The nature of Iranian constitutional revolution

As it was noted previously, Iranian different various social classes were dissatisfied with Qajar regime. In the duration of nineteenth century, Iranians were familiar with new ideas. Besides, they compared their country with European countries and wished their country would be like their European counterparts. It seems Iranian constitutional revolution can be considered as urban movement. Class composition of the movement leader was formed from national bourgeois, radical petty bourgeois, liberal land lords, and progressive Shiite clergy. Class composition of the body of the movement formed were from labors, toilers and the crowd of urban poor. In fact, the most weakness of Iranian constitutional revolution was absence of farmers and peasants which were more than 70 percent of Iranian population. Indeed, constitutional revolution leaders and first parliament members (MPs) didn't want and were not

able to do racial actions to solve problems. The main important Iranian society matter was backward feudal mode of production. However, liberal land lords and progressive Shiite clergy had the most valuable agricultural lands. According to this, they could not do radical reforms in the benefit of peasants and farmers specially land reforms. However, it should be noted that they abolished manorial tradition, which was an important step. In 1908, Iranian parliament with supporting and encouraging Russian Tsar Nicholas the second was shelled. In this operation, Russian Cossacks by leadership of colonel Liakhov bombarded parliament and killed many freedom fighters. In response to these developments, Iranian labors and farmers in northern and Azerbaijan provinces struggled against Mohammad Ali Shah's coupe and its supporter, the Russian imperialism. In fact, the reason is that Iranian anti-imperialist liberation movement became radical and deepened. In these regions, labors, peasants and farmers were the main part of revolutionary forces of armed resistance. Finally, with alliance of democratic forces, the Qajar king was defeated and ran a way to Russia. All of these facts prove that Iranian constitutional revolution was anti-colonial and should have changed Iranian society from half – feudal half_colony to democratic independent capitalist society. In other words, this movement was anti –imperialist and bourgeois – democratic revolution.

The reasons and causes of failure in constitutional revolution

Iranian constitutional revolution should have abolished feudalism collapsed dictatorship and ended the influence of imperialism. Specially imperialism of the Russia as a main supporter of Iranian reactionary forces and the Qajar dynasty. This needed more and more active participation of labors, farmers, peasants and toilers as an absolute majority of the population. However, as it was noted previously, the implementation of radical and decisive reforms specially land reform were impossible because of class composition of leaders of the movement. Liberal land lords and Shiite clergy opposed with the reforms on benefit of peasant and labors. According to the election law, parliamentary election was two stages and just the only people who had a certain amount of assets could vote and be elected. Because of these, not only farmers and workers could not participate in election but labors and toilers also deprived of the voting right. However, national and radical petty bourgeois needed active participation of these classes to abolish feudalism mode of promotion. In addition, national bourgeoisie should have struggled seriously and against imperialism of Russian as the main supporter of Iranian land lords and backward mode of feudalism, reactionary forces and above of all, the

Qajar dynasty. Instead, Iranian bourgeois depended on the British empire as the competitor of Russia, while they solved their disputes with Russians by mediation of France and formed Entente. On the other hand, British foreign minister lord Sir Edward Gary believed to cooperate and close with Russian empire against new raised power, German empire. According to these descriptions, Russian and British empires signed 1907 treaty and divided Iran in two sphere of influences spheres and one neutral part. North for Russian, southern parts for British and central deserts were considered as neutral buffer zone (Nafisi 16, 1966; Foran, 17, 1994)

British didn't show reaction to the coupe against constitution and in 1909, occupied southern parts of Iran like the occupation of northern provinces and Iranian Azerbaijan by Russian.

In addition, after beginning of First World War, Russian, British and Ottoman empires invaded Iran and occupied northern, western and southern parts of the country, although Iranian government declared neutrality. Moreover, Turkish, German, and Austrian spires were active in all parts of the country. Casualties of the war, famine, Chaos, insecurity, collapsing of economy, banditry, invasion and occupation of the country by foreign armies caused, and Iranian people were ready to accept saver dictatorship. In addition, after great socialist Russian October revolution, Iranian liberation and anti-imperialistic movements spread dramatically specially in northern provinces (which led to the formation of a socialist republic in duration of 1920-1921 in Gilan) and Iranian Azerbaijan. Moreover, revolutionary offices revolted against central government and land lords under the influence of Russian revolution. All of these developments and movements were inspired by Bolshevism and threatened British Empire interests in Iran and India seriously. When British failed in imposing of 1919 treaty to Iran (which caused Iranian government lead to independent to portage one practically) they drew the coup of February 22, 1921 coup plan, which was done by colonel Reza khan (who became next Reza Shah and founder of Pahlavi dynasty). Reza khan spread its power gradually, overthrew Qajar dynasty and founded Pahlavi kingdom in 1925. It was the ending point of Iranian constitutional revolution, democrat political duration and restart of dictatorship in Iranian contemporary history.

Conclusion:

Iranian constitutional revolution is considered as the first democratic movement and has important position in Iranian and Asian history. Defeat in the wars of European powers in the 19th century and the separation of whole Caucasus, Afghanistan and

central Asia, imposing on harmful trade treaties which destroyed Iranian national industries and factories, acquaintance with new modern western principles and rules like, democracy, freedom of speech, rule of law, newspapers constitution, independent judiciary branch and so on, prepared Iranian society for changing political regime. In this process, Russian empire was defeated by Japan and Russian constitutional revolution inspired Iranian revolutionary force. Liberal landlords, national bourgeoisie, radical petty bourgeoisie and progressive Shiite clergy unified with each other and lead to anti-colonial democratic constitutional revolution. Although labors, toilers and urban poor masses were the body of the liberation revolution, leadership of movement could not do radical reforms (specially land reforms) and were not able to implement radical reforms specially land reform because of the combination their class. However, Iranian constitutional revolution can be categorized as one kind of democratic and anti-imperialistic movement which Iranian national and radical petty bourgeoisies tried to change feudalism mode of production and transfer their society to capitalism. However, it should be noted they ignored labors, peasant, toilers and the urban poor as their natural allies. Beginning of the world war, occupation of the country by the Britain, Russia and Turkey, chaos and economic problems disappointed people from constitutional and democracy regime. On the other hand, under the influence of Russian revolution, Iranian anti-imperialist liberation movement spread dramatically. All of these developments threatened British interests in the Middle East specially in Iran (British controlled Iranian main oil resources) and security of borders of empire in India. Because of this, at first, they tried to protect Iran by signing of Iranian British 1919 agreement and when they failed in this project, they drew the coup of February 22, 1921 plan and implemented it by Colonel Reza khan. Then, 5 years later in 1925, Reza khan overthrew Qajar dynasty, but founded Pahlavi regime and established new dictatorship.

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