

In 1835 Muhammad Shah had his first prime minister, Abu'l-Qásim Qá'im-Maqám, murdered and replaced him with Haji Mirza Aqasi. During his first year in office, Aqasi succeeded in removing from power most of the supporters of the previous prime minister, filling their positions with his own nominees from Mákú. Among those whom Aqasi removed from power was Bahá'u'lláh's father, Mírzá Buzurg Núrí. Bahá'u'lláh Himself had a prolonged legal dispute with Aqasi over a village, Qúch-Hisár, that Aqasi coveted.

During his term as prime minister, Haji Mirza Aqasi sought unsuccessfully to reform the army. The campaign of 1837–38 in which Muhammad Shah and his forces besieged the city of Herat in western Afghanistan resulted in the shah's being forced to retreat and to conclude an unfavorable treaty with Haji Mirza Aqasi, prime minister Britain in 1841. Aqasi's inexperience in administration and finance, combined under Muhammad Shah Qajar of with entrenched governmental corruption and incompetence and a soaring budget deficit, contributed to the near bankruptcy of the country, rendering it ripe for revolution. He became extremely unpopular, which led to a number of attempts on his life.

Iran. Bahá'í Photographic Library
One of his most unpopular acts was to repossess villages from tuyúl holders (whose fiefdoms were granted during the reign of Fath 'Ali Shah, 1797–1834), resulting in the transfer of a great deal of land to the crown.

On the death of the chronically ill Muhammad Shah in September 1848, many of Tehran's elite rose against Aqasi. He fled to the shrine of Shah 'Abdu'l-'Azím near Tehran. Stripped of his wealth, he sought refuge in Karbala, where he died on 1 August 1849.

RELATIONS WITH THE BÁB AND BÁBÍS

Since Aqasi's position as prime minister was a consequence of his spiritual mastery over Muhammad Shah, it is not surprising that Aqasi viewed with alarm any rival for the shah's favor. He seems to have remained unconcerned about the rise of the Bábí movement between 1844 and 1846, but the Báb's growing renown finally triggered Aqasi's fear that the shah, who was curious about the claims of the youthful and charismatic religious leader, might be influenced by Him. These fears could only have been intensified when Aqasi learned that the Báb had won over the redoubtable governor of Isfahan, Manúchihr Khán, in 1846.

Seeking to discredit the Báb in the shah's eyes, Haji Mirza Aqasi incited

the mullás of Isfahan to condemn the Báb. The shah subsequently summoned the Báb to Tehran. Manúchihr Khán, however, concerned for the Báb's safety, managed to keep Him in Isfahan for four months. Then, early in 1847, Manúchihr Khán died suddenly. He had expressed a desire to convert the shah, but he died unexpectedly before he could act on his intention.

When it became apparent that Manúchihr Khán had been keeping the Báb safe in Isfahan, the shah again summoned the Báb to Tehran. While the Báb was en route, Haji Mirza Aqasi instructed Him to break his journey by stopping in the village of Kulayn, less than fifty kilometers (thirty-one miles) from Tehran. Aqasi, who owned the village, had a tent pitched for the Báb in pleasant surroundings. After weeks had passed, the Báb wrote a letter to the shah, requesting a meeting with the sovereign. Determined that the meeting not take place, Haji Mirza Aqasi instilled fear in the shah, saying that the Báb planned trouble and mischief, and also stressed that a meeting would be untimely because the shah was about to leave the capital. He managed to persuade Muhammad Shah that the best plan of action would be to send the Báb to the fortress of Mákú. The shah sent a letter to the Báb, dated March/April 1847, asking Him to proceed to Mákú. Shoghi Effendi has said that this letter, "though couched in courteous terms, clearly indicated the extent of the baneful influence exercised by the Grand Vizir [Prime Minister] on his sovereign."¹ The Báb was being sent to Mákú as a prisoner; He would remain a prisoner for the rest of His life.

In the course of the Báb's journey to Mákú, Haji Mirza Aqasi stopped letters between the Báb and the shah from being delivered. With the Báb imprisoned in Mákú, Haji Mirza Aqasi thought his actions—sending the Báb to Mákú (whose residents were strongly in Aqasi's debt) and preventing the Báb from meeting the shah—had suppressed the Bábí movement. During the Báb's confinement in Mákú, however, Haji Mirza Aqasi discovered through his spies that the Báb's popularity in Azerbaijan was growing. In addition, partly because the warden of the fortress, 'Alí Khán, had relaxed the rules of access to the charismatic prisoner, Bábís were able to go to Mákú and meet

the Báb, ensuring that His influence continued to spread throughout the country. Haji Mirza Aqasi realized that his efforts had not succeeded, and his hostility toward the Báb and the Bábís increased.

Therefore, in April 1848, Haji Mirza Aqasi decided to send the Báb to a more remote location. In Chihríq, another fortress in Azerbaijan, the pattern repeated itself. When the jailors began relaxing the terms of the Báb's confinement, Haji Mirza Aqasi again intervened, and, after three months in Chihríq, the Báb was summoned to Tabriz. There the prime minister issued an order for the Báb to be tried as an apostate before a gathering of high-ranking religious leaders (mujtahid) in the presence of the young crown prince, Násiri' d-Dín Mírzá.

Aqasi hoped for a public humiliation of the Báb that would extinguish the Bábí movement. Instead, the result of the trial was inconclusive. The Báb shocked the gathering by claiming publicly to be the promised Mahdi. The mujtahids attempted to ridicule and discredit Him but, unable to shake His claim, finally managed to sentence Him, not to death, the usual punishment for apostasy, but to corporal punishment by means of the bastinado. After He recovered from his injuries, which were complicated by a blow that struck His face, He was sent back to Chihríq on Haji Mirza Aqasi's orders.

By the end of 1848, Muhammad Shah was dead and Aqasi in exile. However, governmental opposition to the Báb continued and intensified. Encouraged by the ulama (Muslim religious leaders), the public increasingly turned against the Báb and His followers, and the Bábís "were held responsible for the country's general state of turmoil." 2

HAJI MIRZA AQASI IN THE BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS

In His book the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' , written early in His ministry, the Báb addresses Haji Mirza Aqasi:

O Minister of the Sháh! Fear thou God, besides Whom there is none other God but Him, the Sovereign Truth, the Just, and lay aside thy dominion, for We, by the leave of God, the All-Wise, inherit the earth and all who are upon it, and He shall rightfully be a witness unto thee and unto the Sháh. Were ye to obey the Remembrance of

God with absolute sincerity, We guarantee, by the leave of God, that on the Day of Resurrection, a vast dominion shall be yours in His eternal Paradise.³

The Báb's later position regarding Haji Mirza Aqasi is unequivocal. In a letter to Muhammad Shah, the Báb calls Aqasi "the devil whom thou hast appointed as thy Chancellor" ⁴ and warns the shah that Haji Mirza Aqasi "will bring thee into grievous trouble by reason of that which Satan instilleth in his heart, and verily, he himself is Satan." The Báb finds Aqasi's actions unprincipled and self-serving: "He comprehendeth not a single letter from the Book of God and is seized with fear by reason of that which his hands have wrought. Fain would he extinguish the light which thy Lord hath kindled, so that the old impiety which is concealed in his inner being may not be revealed." The Báb adds that, if Muhammad Shah had not appointed Haji Mirza Aqasi as prime minister, "no one would have paid him the slightest attention. Indeed in the estimation of the people he is naught but manifest darkness." ⁵

Haji Mirza Aqasi was the recipient of at least one epistle, known as the *Khutbiy-i-Qahríyyih* (Sermon of Wrath), from the Báb. Shoghi Effendi describes it as "couched in bold and moving language" and "unsparing in its condemnation."⁶ The Bábí historian Nabíl states that in this document, which has not yet been published, the Báb "addresses the Grand Vazír of Muhammad Shah in these terms: 'O thou who has disbelieved in God and hast turned thy face away from His signs!'" ⁷

In his survey of the first century of Bábí and Bahá'í history, *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi refers to Haji Mirza Aqasi as "a vulgar, false-hearted and fickle-minded schemer" and calls him "the Antichrist of the Bábí Revelation." ⁸

Author: Sholeh A. Quinn

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Notes:

1. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 2004 printing) 16.
2. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850*,

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3. Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of

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2:3.2: 53–54.

4. Báb, Selections 1:6.7: 32–33.

5. Báb, Selections 1:6.6: 32.

6. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 27.

7. Nabíl A'zam [Muhammad Zarandí], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í*

Revelation, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (1932; Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996) 323.

8. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 4, 164.

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