Iran between Two Revolutions

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Ervand Abrahamian

New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982

1. PDF of entire book (see just the Bahá'í-related excerpts below)

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2. Excerpts directly relevant to the Bahá'í Faith

[pages 16-17]

In the course of the nineteenth century, Shi'ism developed two major schisms: Shaykhism and Babism. The former was founded in the 1810s by an Arab preacher named Shaykh Ahmad 'Ahsa'i. A convert from Sunnism, the shaykh accepted wholeheartedly not only the orthodox Shi'i premise that the Imams were the true successors of the Prophet, but also the unorthodox teaching of Mulla Sadra, the seventeenth-century Sufi mystic who had argued that the Imams were divine, and that perfect believers could communicate directly with the Hidden Imam. The shaykh also added to these Sufi concepts the novel idea that the community was in constant motion toward improvement, and that God had given each generation a Perfect Shi'i — also known as the Bab (Gate) — to communicate with the Hidden Imam and to lead the way.13 Although the mujtaheds denounced these ideas as heretical, the shaykh and his immediate successor, Sayyid Kazem Rashti, attracted numerous followers in the main cities, especially in Kerman, Yazd, and Tabriz. But after Rashti's death in 1843, their followers split into three rival groups.14 The first group, formed predominantly of merchants and craftsmen in Tabriz, labeled itself the Shaykhis, and, while giving up the idea of the Bab, remained committed to the concept of social progress. The second group, led by a princely governor of Kerman named Hajj Karim Khan, gave up the concepts of both progress and the Bab, and turned highly conservative, preaching submission to the state and denouncing all reforms, including modern schools, as dangerous innovations. This group later adopted the label of Karimkhanis, and dominated the city of Kerman. The third group, headed by a Mulla Hussein Bushruyeh, remained true to the original teachings of the shaykh, advocating progress and reform, and expecting the imminent appearance of the Perfect Shi'i.

The expected messiah appeared in 1844 in the form of a young merchant turned theologian named Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad. After years of studying with Shaykhi theologians in Karbala, 'Ali Muhammad declared himself the Bab, and, winning over many former disciples of 'Ahsa'i, preached the need for social reforms, especially elimination of corruption in high places, purging of immoral clerics, legal protection for merchants, legalization of money lending, and improvement in the status of women. Not surprisingly, his message gained him both the enmity of the establishment and the support of some discontented traders, artisans, low-ranking clerics, and even peasants. Fearing the movement's rapid growth — especially in the Caspian provinces — the government in 1850 executed the Bab and initiated a bloody campaign against the Babis. Although persecution failed to destroy Babism, it succeeded in splitting the movement into two rival branches known as Bahá'ísm and 'Azalism. The former, headed by the Bab's chosen successor, Bahá'ullah, gradually lost interest in radical reforms and eventually became a new apolitical religion outside the fold of Islam. The latter, led by Bahá'ullah's brother, Subh-i 'Azal, remained true to its radical origins, and continued as a persecuted underground organization.

In addition to these new communities, nineteenth-century Iran still contained many old Shi'i sects. For example, scattered villages outside Yazd, Kerman, Mahallat, Nishapur, Qa'in, and Birjand adhered to the Isma'ili sect. As Isma'ilis, they believed that the Shi'i line of succession should have passed through a younger son of the Seventh Imam. Moreover, some villages on the western border practiced 'Ali-Ilah'i doctrines. These teachings denounced mosques, opposed polygamy, rejected the concept of ritual uncleanliness, permitted the consumption of pork and wine, and, most unorthodox of all, deified Imam 'Ali as the reincarnation of God. Furthermore, almost all the. major towns were divided into two rival factions known as Ni'matis and Haydaris. The former took its name from Amir Nur al-Din Ni'mat Allah, a Sufi mystic and descendant of the Fifth Imam. The latter was named after Sultan al-Din Haydar, another Sufi mystic and ancestor of the Safavid dynasty that had transformed Iran into a Shi'i state. Explaining how towns became divided into Ni'mati and Haydari factions, Justin Sheil, the British minister to Iran from 1836 to 1853, commented, "it is strange that even well-informed people can give no real explanation for the original causes of these divisions."15

13 M. Bayat, Mysticism and Dissent: Socio-Religious Thought in Qajar Iran (Syracuse, N.Y., 1982).

14 For a brief history of the Shaykhis, see N. Fathi, Zendiginameh-yi Shahid Shaykh al-Islam Tabrizi (The Life of Martyr Shaykh al-Islam of Tabriz) (Tehran, 1974).

15 J. Sheil, Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia (London, 1856), pp. 322-23. For recent research on the topic see H. Mirjafari, "The Haydari-Ni'mati Conflicts in Iran," Iranian Studies, 12 (Summer-Autumn 1979), 135-62.

The many occupations in the central bazaar of Isfahan were organized into separate guilds. The city tax collector, in a detailed report for 1877, enumerated nearly two hundred different occupations.26 Some, especially the skilled craftsmen such 'as engravers, miniaturists, coppersmiths, goldsmiths, silversmiths, gunmakers, bookbinders, saddlers, and carpenters, had well-structured and long-established guilds. Others, particularly the middle-income tradesmen such as grocers, confectioners, drapers, corn chandlers, tobacconists, opium sellers, haberdashers, and moneylenders, had less structured but nevertheless well-established associations. Yet others, particularly those in the unskilled, low-income occupations — porters, laborers, peddlers, bath attendants, and water carriers — had their own loosely structured but easily recognizable identities.

The nearby rural districts of Chahar Mahal, Fereidan, Pusht-i Kuh, Karvan, and Sehnahiyeh contained even more social organizations. Their peasant population was divided not only into some five hundred separate villages, but also into numerous linguistic and religious communities. Besides the many settlements that spoke various dialects of Persian and adhered to the official branch of Shi'ism, a substantial number spoke Azeri, thirty-six were Armenian, fourteen were Georgian, and one was Bahá'í. Although the Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians had been transported there by the Safavids two centuries earlier — mainly to cultivate and guard the mountain passes — they still retained their cultural identity. A mid-twentieth-century visitor reported that the Georgians, despite their conversion to Islam, tenaciously held onto their language, customs, and village organizations. And a late nineteenth-century traveler found that although the prosperous Bahá'í village of Najafabad did not live up to its former fame as "revolutionary," as far as its neighbors were concerned it continued to bear a sinister reputation.27

26 Mirza Hussein Khan, Jughrafiya-yi Isfahan, pp. 93-122.

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... The Dar al-Fonun offered its students, who were mostly sons of the aristocracy, classes in foreign languages, political science, engineering, agriculture, minerology, medicine, veterinary medicine, military sciences, and band music. To finance these projects, Amir Kabir reduced other expenses, especially court expenses, and raised government revenues through increases on import duties, a moratorium on sale of offices, scrutiny of tax collectors, and a new tax on fief holders that no longer contributed armed men for imperial defense.

These measures created an immediate reaction. The fief holders considered the new tax not a legitimate substitute for traditional dues but an unwanted extortion designed to strengthen the government at the expense of the provinces. The representatives from Britain and Russia were disturbed not only by the protective tariffs but also by the decision to seek technical assistance in France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The queen mother used her influence over the shah on behalf of courtiers who were hard pressed by the financial

cuts. And as a final blow, the Babi revolt, which coincided with these reforms, created a general atmosphere of political instability. Amir Kabir was dismissed in 1851, banished to the provinces, and executed there soon after; his plans for the future were cast aside, and his industrial factories, despite heavy investments, were left to wither away. Thus ended the last nineteenth-century attempt at rapid, defensive, and statewide modernization.

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The deputies, in adopting the Belgian constitution, made two major adaptations to suit local conditions. They recognized the existence of the provincial councils by endowing them with the authority to "exercise free supervision over all reforms connected with the public interest provided that they observe the limitations prescribe by the law." And they acknowledged in a number of clauses the importance of religion in general and of the religious leaders in particular. The judicial branch was divided into civil tribunals and ecclesiastical courts with extensive jurisdiction over religious laws. The Twelver doctrine of Shi'ism was declared to be the official religion of Iran. Only Muslims could be appointed as cabinet ministers. The executive undertook the duty of banning "heretical" organizations and publications. And a "supreme committee" of mujtaheds was to scrutinize all bills introduced into parliament to ensure that no law contradicted the shari'a. This committee, comprising at least five members, was to be elected by the deputies from a list of twenty submitted by the 'ulama. The committee would sit until "the appearance of the Mahdi (May God Hasten His Glad Advent)." The traditional gospel of Shi'ism had been incorporated into a modern structure of government derived from Montesquieu. The spirit of society, to paraphrase Montesquieu, had helped formulate the laws of the constitution.

The shah, seeing the demise of all royal authority, refused to ratify the Supplementary Fundamental Laws. Instead he denounced four outspoken leaders of the opposition — Malek al-Motakallemin, Jamal al-Din, Mirza Jahanger Khan of the paper Sur-i Israfil, and Muhammad Reza Shirazi of Mosavat — as "heretical Babis" and "republican subversives." He proclaimed that as a good Muslim he could accept the Islamic term mashru' (lawful) but not the alien concept mashru' (constitutional). In the same breath, he waxed enthusiastic for the German constitution and proposed that the head of state should appoint all ministers, including the war minister, enjoy real as well as nominal command of the armed forces, and retain personal control over 10,000 bodyguards.

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The reign of Reza Shah also saw the emergence of a discontented industrial working class. Low wages, long hours, high consumer taxes, forced transfer of workers to the malaria-infested region of Mazandaran, and labor conditions that, in the words of a European visitor, practically resembled slavery,"129 all caused widespread industrial discontent. Since trade unions had been banned in 1926, the discontent took the form of underground cells and wildcat strikes. On May Day 1929, eleven thousand workers in the oil refinery struck for higher

wages, an eight-hour day, paid annual vacations, company housing, and union recognition. Although the oil company granted the wage demands, the British navy dispatched a gunboat to Basra, and the Iranian authorities arrested over five hundred workers. The British foreign minister formally congratulated the shah for his "speedy and effective handling of the incident."130 Five of the strike leaders remained in prison until 1941. In 1931, five hundred employees in the Vatan textile mill in Isfahan stopped work for better wages, an eight-hour day, and one day a week paid vacation. Although the strike organizers were jailed, the workers won a 20 percent wage increase and a cut in the work day from ten to nine hours.131 In late 1931, only two years after the completion of the first stretch of the Trans-Iranian Railway, eight hundred railway workers in Mazandaran went on a successful eight-day strike for higher wages. Their strike organizers were still in jail in 1941.132 The British consul in Tabriz summed up the general labor situation in these words: "We are in a transitional stage between old and new. The employee is losing his personal association with his employer and much of his pride in the finished product. There is not, as yet, adequate provisions for injury or for unemployment to replace the moral responsibility of the old type employer. The government has broken down a structure without rebuilding in its place.... Reza Shah has, rather dangerously perhaps, dismissed Allah from the economic sphere and set himself instead in the moral ethics of industry."133

Meanwhile, Reza Shah's drive for national unification created further resentment among the religious and linguistic minorities. Bahá'í schools, with over 1,500 pupils in Tehran alone, lost their license to teach in 1934 on the pretext that they had observed the anniversary of the Bab's martyrdom. The Jewish deputy in the Majles, Samuel Haim, was suddenly executed in 1931 for unexplained reasons. The Zoroastrian deputy, Shahroukh Arbab Keykhosrow, who had faithfully supported Reza Shah since 1921, was gunned down in the street by the police in 1940 because his son in Germany, against his father's wishes, had broadcast a series of pro-Nazi speeches. The Armenian community schools lost first their European language classes, and then, in 1938, their license to teach. In the same year, Ittila'at (Information), the semiofficial government daily, waged a front-page campaign against the Christian minority by running a series of articles on "dangerous criminals," all with obviously Armenian and Assyrian names. The British legation reported that such attacks echoed Nazi radicalism and were designed to appeal to the bigoted chauvinists and the most reactionary mullas.134 The policy of closing down minority schools and printing presses, however, hit especially hard at the Azeris; being more urbanized than the Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkomans, the Azeris had already developed their own indigeneous intelligentsia.

129 British Minister to the Foreign Office, "Annual Report for 1934," FO. 371/Persia 1935/34-18995.

130 British Minister to the Foreign Office, "The Strike in Abadan," FO. 371/Persia 929/34-13783.

The religious animosities appeared mostly in provincial towns. For example, in Tabriz, Muslim-Christian animosities reached such proportions that the British consul warned that blood would flow as soon as the Allies withdrew from Iran. In Urmiah, Assyrian church leaders expressed similar concern and sought British protection in case the war ended in the near future. In Mashad, Soviet troops had to intervene during the Muharram processions of 1944 to protect the Jewish quarter. In Ahwaz, a crowd of eight hundred angry Muslims, incited by the rumor that Jews had kidnapped a Muslim child, tried to burn down the local synagogue. In Kerman, an emotional mob led by a fanatical mulla attacked the Zoroastrian district, killing two men and plundering numerous houses. And in Shahrud, a similar mob attacked the Bahá'í temple, lynching three men and sacking fifty shops.13 Significantly, the Haydari-Ni'mati and the Shaykhi-Karimkhani-Mutashar'i rivalries of the nineteenth century failed to reappear with any meaningful force. In fact, the term "Haydari-Ni'mati' was used in this period to describe meaningless and archaic squabbles.

13 British Consul in Tabriz, 'The Christian Minority in Azerbaijan," FO. 371/Persia 1942/34-31430; British Minister to the Foreign Office, 9 January 1942, EQ. 371/Persia 1942/34-31430; British Consul in Ahwaz, 15 October 1943, EQ. 371/Persia 1943/34-35090; British Consul in Mashad, 8 September 1944, EQ. 371/Persia 1944/34-40184; Rahbar, 23 October 1946; H. Kuhi-Kermani, Az Shahrivar 1320 ta Faj'eh-i Azerba~jan (From August 1941 to the Disaster of Azerbaijan) (Tehran, 1946), II, 630.

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Although the Tudeh promised equality, full citizenship, and secular reforms to all the religious minorities, it made noticeable inroads only among the Christians, and, despite individual recruits, failed on the whole among the Sunnis, Bahá'ís, Jews, and Zoroastrians. The Sunnis were confined predominantly to tribal groups, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Turkomans, living in the more backward regions. Moreover, the Sunni Arabs and Baluchis had traditionally looked upon Britain as their protector against the central government. The Bahá'ís stood aloof from the Tudeh and other parties mainly because the violent persecution suffered by their predecessors, the Babis, had persuaded them to shun politics, especially radical politics. The Jews, after a brief interest in the Tudeh during the war years, turned more toward Zionism, and the migration of some 50,000 to Israel drained their intellectual and proletarian element, leaving behind a community made up predominantly of small traders. The Zoroastrian minority, with the exception of a few pro-Tudeh intellectuals and workers, tended to be conservative partly because it identified itself with Reza Shah's brand of secular nationalism; partly because it kept close contact with its coreligionists, the Parsis of India; and partly because it was concentrated in Yazd and Kerman, two cities with commercial ties to the British empire.

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The shah displayed a similar degree of caution when dealing with the

traditional middle class. He and his wife, Queen Soraya, made periodic pilgrimages to Mecca, Karbala, Qum, and Mashad. Prominent religious leaders, especially Ayatallah Boroujerdi, Ayatallah Behbehani, and the Imam Jom'eh of Tehran, continued to enjoy easy access to the court. Ayatallah Kashani and his colleague, Qonatabadi, were briefly imprisoned in 1956, but were released as soon as they publicly disassociated themselves from the Feda'iyan-i Islam and agreed not to protest the execution of Razmara's assassins. The government vowed to uphold religion, and continually denounced the Tudeh as the "enemy of private property and Islam." The military general of Tehran in 1955 encouraged a religious mob to ransack the main Bahá'í center in Tehran. What is more, the bazaars retained much of their independence. The shah imprisoned only two merchants for their role in the Mossadeq administration, avoided price controls, kept the army out of the market places, and permitted the guilds to elect their own elders even after 1957, when a High Council of Guilds was set up in Tehran. In the ten years between 1953 and 1963, only once did the shah violate his hands-off policy. In 1954, when the guild leaders organized a strike to protest the oil agreement with the consortium, he ordered the troops into the Tehran bazaar. The occupation lasted only two days, however.

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1. The Upper Class. Totaling no more than one thousand individuals, the class consisted of six groups: a. the Pahlevi family with its 63 princes, princesses, and cousins; b. aristocratic families that had turned their interests to urban ventures long before the land reform of the 1960s — aristocratic families such as the Aminis, 'Alams, Bayats, Qaragozlus, Davalus, Moqadams, and Jehanbanis; c. enterprising aristocrats, such as Khodadad Farmanfarmaian, Amir Timourtash, Mehdi Busheri, and Nouri Isfandiari, who survived land reform by setting up agro-businesses, banks, trading companies, and industrial firms; d. some 200 elder politicians, senior civil servants, and high-ranking military officers who prospered by sitting on managerial boards and facilitating lucrative government contracts; e. old-time entrepreneurs who made their first million during the commercial boom of World War II and went on to make additional millions during the oil boom of the 1960s and 1970s — prominent among them were Mehdi Namazi, Habib Sabeti, Qassem Lajevardi, Habib Elqanian, Rasul Vahabzadeh, Hassan Herati, Assadallah Rashidian, Muhammad Khosrowshahi, Ja'far Akhavan, and Abul Fazel Lak; f. a half-dozen new entrepreneurs, notably Ahmad Khiami, Mahmud Rezai, Hojaber Yazdani, and Morad Arya, who built vast business empires during the late 1960s mainly because of their personal contacts with the royal family, the old entrepreneurs, and the multinational corporations.

These wealthy families owned not only many of the large commercial farms, but also some 85 percent of the major private firms involved in banking, manufacturing, foreign trade, insurance, and urban construction.17 Although the vast majority of the upper class was Muslim, some senior officials had joined the court-connected Freemason Lodge in Tehran, and a few — notably Yazdani, Elqanian, and Arya — came from Bahá'í and Jewish backgrounds. This provided

fuel for rumors often heard in the bazaars that the whole upper class represented an international conspiracy hatched by Zionists, Bahá'ís centered in Haifa, and British imperialists through the Freemason Lodge in London.

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The second factor that explains Khomeini's prominence is his astuteness, in particular his ability to rally behind him a wide spectrum of political and social forces. In his fifteen years of exile, he carefully avoided making public pronouncements, especially written ones, on issues that would alienate segments of the opposition — issues such as land reform, clerical power, and sexual equality. Instead, he hammered the regime on topics that outraged all sectors of the opposition: the concessions granted to the West, the tacit alliance with Israel, the wasteful expenditures or arms, the rampant corruption in high places, the decay of agriculture, the rise in the cost of living, the housing shortage and the sprawling slums, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the suppression of newspapers and political parties, the creation of a vast bureaucratic state, and the gross violations of the constitutional laws. In denouncing the regime, Khomeini promised to liberate the country from foreign domination; extend freedom to all political parties, even "atheistic" ones; guarantee the rights of all religious minorities, except those of the "heretical" Bahá'ís; and bring social justice to all, particularly to the bazaaris, the intelligentsia (rushanfekran), the peasantry (dehqanan), and, most mentioned of all, the dispossessed masses (mostazafin). These promises, especially the populist and anti-imperialist themes, succeeded in winning over a wide range of political forces, from the followers of the late Ayatallah Kashani and remnants of the Feda'iyan-i Islam at one end of the spectrum, to the Liberation Movement and the National Front at the center, and to the Tudeh, Mujahedin, and the Marxist Feda'i at the other end of the spectrum.

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