



‘ABDALLĀH BEHBAHĀNĪ

‘ABDALLĀH BEHBAHĀNĪ (1256-1328/1840-1910), theologian (*mojtahed*) and a prominent leader of the constitutional movement. Born in Najaf in 1256/1840, he was descended from a prominent Shi‘ite scholar of Baḥrayn, ‘Abdallāh al-Belādī from the village of al-Ġorayfa, whose numerous offspring migrated to various centers of learning in Iraq and Iran. The task of ‘Abdallāh Behbahānī’s education was at first assumed by his father, Sayyed Esmā‘īl; but he later studied under more prominent scholars in Najaf, such as Ḥosayn Kūhkamara‘ī, Mīrzā Ḥasan Šīrāzī, and Shaikh Rāzī Najafī. In 1287/1870, Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah made the acquaintance of Sayyed Esmā‘īl while on a visit to Najaf; and he prevailed upon him to accompany him back to Tehran in order to establish a center of religious leadership favorable to the court (Āġā Bozorg Tehrānī, *Ṭabaqāt al‘ālam al-šī‘a* II, Najaf, 1381/1962, pp. 146-47). Three years later, we find him among the few ‘*olamā*’ to bid the monarch a friendly farewell on the eve of one of his European journeys (Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, *Rūznāma-ye safar-e farangestān*, Bombay, 1293/1876, p. 4). In addition to his royal patronage, Sayyed Esmā‘īl attained a position of some influence among the people of Tehran as *marja‘-e taqlīd* and judge of the religious law (*šarī‘a*; see Mīrzā Moḥammad Ḥasan Khan E‘temād-al-salṭana, *al-Ma‘āṭer wa‘l-āṭār*, Tehran, 1306/1889, p. 140; Moḥammad Mahdī Mūsavī Eṣfahānī Kāzemī, *Aḥsan al-wadī‘a fī tarājem mašāhīr mojtahedīn al-šī‘a*, 2nd ed., Najaf, 1387/1965, I, pp. 65-66). When he died in 1295/1878, ‘Abdallāh Behbahānī fell heir to his function and influence and emerged as one of the influential ‘*olamā*’ of Tehran.



His first significant participation in political affairs reflected the loyalist attitudes of his father, as well as a lively ambitiousness that was to persist until the end of his life. In 1309/1891 a campaign took place under clerical leadership against the tobacco concession that had been granted by Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah to a British company; and a *fatvā* attributed to Mīrzā Ḥasan Šīrāzī forbade all consumption of tobacco until the concession was rescinded. Behbahānī refused to associate himself with the boycott and was seen to smoke openly in a gathering at the Ottoman embassy in Tehran (Mīrzā ‘Alī Khan Amīn-al-dawla, *Kāṭerāt-e sīāsī*, ed. Ḥāfeẓ Farmānfarmā’īān, Tehran, 1341 Š./1962, p. 155; according to other accounts he went so far as to smoke while preaching from the *menbar*; see Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāda, “Aškāšī ke dar mašrūṭiyat sahmī dāstand,” *Yağmā* 24, 1350 Š./1971-72, p. 66). He claimed that as *mojtahed* he was exempt from obedience to the *fatvā*, the accuracy of whose ascription to Mīrzā Ḥasan Šīrāzī he in any event doubted; and he raised certain other technical objections to the boycott (Nāẓem-al-eslām Kermānī, *Tārīk-e bīdārī-e īrānīān*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar Sa’īdī Šīrjānī, Tehran, 1346 Š./1967, p. 22; Mīrzā Moḥammad Ḥasan Khan E’temād-al-salṭana, *Rūznāma-ye kāṭerāt*, ed. Īraǰ Afšar, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1350 Š./1971, pp. 784-85). Suspicions arose, however, that he had been bribed; one source claims that he received 1,000 pounds from the British to smoke in public (‘Abbās Mīrzā Molkārā, *Šarḥ-e ḥāl*, ed. ‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn Navā’ī, Tehran, 1325 Š./1946, p. 116; see also Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: the Tobacco Protest of 1891-92*, London, 1961, p. 79). The accusations raised against Behbahānī are plausible; for he maintained close relations with the British legation in Tehran for a number of years and was described by Lt. Col. H. Picot in May, 1897, as having “stood by his legation at the time of the Régie [Tobacco Monopoly]” (memorandum enclosed in dispatch of Hardinge to Salisbury, F. O. 539/76, quoted in Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion*, p. 118; and Firuz Kazemzade, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864-1914*, New Haven, 1968, p. 309). It is also said that the Iranian government rewarded him for his loyalty in the episode with a gold watch (Picot, “Biographical Notes of Persian Notables,” F. O. 60/592, quoted in Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran*, p. 213, n. 46). His alleged venality in any event earned him the opprobrious epithet of Ebn al-Feẓẓa (“Son of silver”) (E’temād-al-salṭana, *Rūznāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 947). Loyalty to Mīrzā ‘Alī Ašğar Khan Amīn-al-solṭān, the minister under whose auspices the concession had been granted, provided another reason for Behbahānī to oppose the tobacco boycott; and he once visited Ornstein, Tehran manager of the company that had obtained the concession, on behalf of Amīn-al-solṭān to discuss ways of breaking the boycott (Ebrāhīm Teymūrī, *Taḥrīm-e tanbākū yā avvalīn moqāvamat-e manfī dar Īrān*,



Tehran, 1328 Š./1949, p. 149).

The political activities of Behbahānī in the decade following the tobacco boycott appear to have been coordinated with the British legation in Tehran. Whether, for example, the *'olamā'* began demanding the dismissal of *'Alā'*-al-dawla, governor of the province of Kūzestān (then called *'Arabestān'*), because of the alleged murder of one of their number in Šūštar, he contacted the British legation to inquire of their wishes in the matter, offering to “throw cold water on the whole affair” (see Picot’s memorandum of May, 1897, quoted above). Further contacts took place in 1319/1902, when the Iranian government was about to conclude a new loan agreement with Russia. Behbahānī was now faced with a conflict of loyalties; for Amīn-al-solṭān, now in his second term as prime minister, had aligned himself with the Russians instead of the British after the repeal of the tobacco concession. He was therefore initially reluctant to participate in the clerical agitation against Amīn-al-solṭān and the Russian loan; but in February, 1902, he was visited by Grahame, an agent of the British legation, “under the guise of other business,” and encouraged to “express himself.” He confided to the agent that, together with all *mojṭaheds* of Tehran, he was “revolted at the loan and its conditions,” but pointed out that his opposition to an earlier loan had had no effect. He would nonetheless seek to prevent conclusion of the new loan, and he asked for 2,000 tomans to bring over those *'olamā'* who were not yet hostilely disposed to it. In the course of a further meeting with Grahame at the end of the month, Behbahānī repeated the need for funds to bribe prominent *mojṭaheds*, but received only 250 tomans as traveling expenses for emissaries he was to send to contact *'olamā'* in the provinces (dispatches of Hardinge to Lansdowne, February 14 and 27, 1902, in F. O. 60/660, quoted by Kiddie, “Iranian Politics 1900-1905: Background to Revolution,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 5, 1969, pp. 22-24).

Clerical agitation failed to prevent the conclusion of a new loan agreement for more than a year and ultimately forced the renewed dismissal of Amīn-al-solṭān in Jomādā II, 1321/September, 1903. Behbahānī had no share in the latter stages of this campaign, coming indeed to the minister’s aid late in 1320/1902 by persuading clerical demonstrators demanding the dismissal of the governor of Māzandarān to disperse (see his letter to Amīn-al-solṭān in Ebrāhīm Ṣafā’ī, *Asnād-e nowyāfta*, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970, p. 209). He re-emerged into political activity only when Amīn-al-solṭān’s successor, *'Ayn-al-dawla*, failed to accord him the differential treatment which he had been accustomed



to receive from the state and favored instead his chief rival for supremacy among the Tehran 'olamā', Shaikh Faẓlallāh Nūrī. It was Behbahānī's opposition to 'Ayn-al-dawla that gradually drew him into the constitutional movement, his share in the leadership of which came to form the most significant part of his career. The first clash between Behbahānī and 'Ayn-al-dawla occurred in the aftermath of a struggle between the *ṭollāb* of the two *madrāsas* in Tehran, the Moḥammadiya and the Ṣadr. Behbahānī gave refuge in his house to one of the *ṭollāb* of the Moḥammadiya, Mo'tamad-al-eslām, and as a result was attacked one night by a party of the opposing side as he was passing by the Maṣjed-e Shah. The attack took place partly at the instigation of Ḥājj Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem Emām Jom'a, who wished to avenge his father, Ḥājj Mīrzā Zayn-al-'ābedīn, for a humiliation suffered by him and his party at the hands of Behbahānī, during commemorative ceremonies for Teqat-al-eslām Eṣfahānī several years earlier (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 96-98). Fourteen of those responsible for the attack were arrested at the demand of Behbahānī's supporters, but they were punished with a severity that was received as an affront to the whole clerical class. Behbahānī's intercession on their behalf with 'Ayn-al-dawla was brusquely rebuffed, and his hostility to the minister increased (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 34-35; Maḥdī-qolī Khan Hedāyat, *Kāṭerāt va kaṭarāt*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1344 Š./1965, p. 141).

In Moḥarram, 1323/March-April, 1905, there came into the hands of Behbahānī a photograph of Naus, the Belgian supervisor of the Iranian customs, attired in clerical dress on the occasion of a fancy-dress ball; this provided him with a pretext for demanding the dismissal of the unpopular Naus, who was widely accused of discriminating in favor of non-Muslim merchants. He had copies of the photograph distributed, and preached against Naus and 'Ayn-al-dawla throughout Moḥarram (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 27-28; Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, pp. 37, 48; Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo'aṣer yā ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā*, Tehran, 1331 Š./1952, II, pp. 4-5). These instigations were ineffectual, and the merchants of Tehran withdrew to the shrine at Shah 'Abd-al-'Azīm in protest at the government's economic policies. Behbahānī was, however, assured by the crown prince, Moḥammad 'Alī Mīrzā, that Naus would be dismissed, and temporarily ceased his preaching (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, p. 58). Shortly after this episode, an alliance was formed between Behbahānī and another Tehran *mojtahed*, the reform-minded Moḥammad Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Kasravī sees in this alliance the origin of the constitutional revolution (*Mašrūṭa*⁵, p. 48), and it is certainly true that the two *mojtaheds* together effectively dominated both the events that led to the granting of the constitution and the activities of



the first Maḥles. Kermānī claims that the alliance of the two men, and the direction of their combined energies to the cause of constitutionalism, was the achievement of a secret *anjoman* (society) to which he belonged; emissaries were sent to Behbahānī persuading him to aim higher than the dismissal of Naus and the disgrace of ‘Ayn-al-dawla (*Bīdārī*, pp. 29-33; see also Maḥdī Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb-e mašrūṭiyat-e Īrān* II, Tehran, 1329 Š./1950, pp. 24-25). Whatever the truth of this claim, Behbahānī appears to have initiated the alliance by approaching four of the *mojtaheds* of Tehran through an intermediary and seeking their cooperation in bringing about the fall ‘Ayn-al-dawla: Of the four, it was only Ṭabāṭabā’ī who gave him an unambiguously positive answer. The alliance was sealed by a visit of Behbahānī to Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s house on 25 Ramaḥān 1323/23 November 1905 (*Bīdārī*, p. 84). Less than a month after the conclusion of the alliance, ‘Alā’-al-dawla, now governor of Tehran and a protégé of ‘Ayn-al-dawla, inflicted a beating on a group of Tehran merchants, allegedly for selling sugar at extortionate prices, but in reality to punish them for opposition to the government. A meeting of protest in the Mašjed-e Shah was organized under the leadership of Behbahānī and Ṭabāṭabā’ī; but the intrigues of the Emām Jom’a, anxious for further vengeance on Behbahānī, caused it to end in violence and disarray. Behbahānī was escorted from the mosque by a guard of Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s supporters to the safety of the Madrasa-ye Khan-e Marvī; and the next day, at the suggestion of Ṭabāṭabā’ī, the two *mojtaheds* led the ‘*olamā*’ of the capital out of Tehran to take refuge at Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Aẓīm (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 94-100; Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, pp. 60-64; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, pp. 41-47; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo’āṣer* II, pp. 10-17).

Behbahānī and Ṭabāṭabā’ī, together with the other ‘*olamā*’, now formulated conditions for their return to Tehran, including a demand for the establishment of an ‘*adālatkāna* (“House of Justice”), the nature of which was not yet fully defined but emerged later as the equivalent of a consultative assembly. ‘Ayn-al-dawla was convinced that the aim of Behbahānī was merely personal, and he sought to separate him from Ṭabāṭabā’ī in order to destroy the leadership of the movement (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, p. 107; Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, pp. 66). His efforts were fruitless, and Behbahānī emphasized the demand for an ‘*adālatkāna* through a series of emissaries he sent to Tehran, as well as by the intervention of the Ottoman ambassador, Şemsettin Bey (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, p. 120; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo’āṣer* II, pp. 20-21, 29). The demands of the ‘*olamā*’ were accepted, at least formally, by Moẓaffar-al-dīn Shah, and on 16 Ḍu’l-qa’da 1323/13 January 1906, Behbahānī returned in triumph to Tehran,



together with Ṭabāṭabā’ī and the other ‘*olamā*’. There now began for him a period of almost uncontested prominence among the ‘*olamā*’ of Tehran, his chief rival, Shaikh Fażlallāh Nūrī, having failed to associate himself with the rising constitutional movement. But many in the ranks of the constitutionalists suspected him of imperfect loyalty, and a private meeting he had with ‘Ayn-al-dawla aroused great, if passing, hostility against him. Leaflets were distributed at night denouncing his alleged treachery (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, p. 171; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, p. 125; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo’āṣer* II, pp. 35-36). Ṭabāṭabā’ī defended Behbahānī’s motives, despite his disapproval of the move; and Behbahānī cleared himself by continuing to preach in favor of constitutional reform at the Mesjed-e Sar-e Pūlak. Before long, in any event, a new incident, the murder of one of Behbahānī’s followers, Sayyed ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd, provoked a new clash between the ‘*olamā*’ and the government, a new protest meeting (in the Mesjed-e Jāme’), and a new migration from the city, this time to Qom. All accounts agree that Behbahānī displayed exemplary courage and determination in these events (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 240-58; Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, pp. 97-106; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo’āṣer* II, pp. 68-71). A simultaneous movement of the merchants of Tehran into the grounds of the British legation took place, almost certainly at Behbahānī’s instigation. A British report, at the end of 1906, describes Behbahānī as “very corrupt” and acting chiefly out of personal motives (*General Report on Persia for the Year 1906*, F. O. 416/30, p. 29); but the same cooperative relationship that had existed earlier between the *mojtahed* and the legation was still intact. Behbahānī wrote a series of letters to Grand Duff, chargé d’affaires, requesting his aid, and the replies he received must have been of a nature to inspire the influx of merchants into the legation (*General Report*, p. 5; Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 261-62; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo’āṣer* II, p. 71; Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, p. 109, acquits Behbahānī of responsibility for unspecified reasons).

On 27 Jomādā II 1324/18 August 1906, the ‘*olamā*’ reentered Tehran, having achieved a triumph more substantial than their first. ‘Ayn-al-dawla had left office, and before long the first Maḵles was convened. Behbahānī entered on a period of even greater influence than before. His only formal title to power in the Maḵles was a mandate to represent the Jewish and Armenian communities (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 343, 196; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, p. 179), but he exercised a decisive say in almost all matters concerning the Maḵles. Suspicions again arose that Behbahānī was concerned only with personal ambition; and after visiting the shah alone, he was obliged to defend himself before the Maḵles against the charges of having been bribed (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*,



pp. 350-54; Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo'āšer* II, p. 87; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, p. 188). In Rabī' I, 1325/May, 1907, Behbahānī's old patron, Amīn-al-soltān (now titled Atābak) was reappointed prime minister; and the two men kept in close contact (Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo'āšer* II, pp. 118, 125, 130-31; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, p. 12). But a complex pattern of rivalries was emerging, in and out of the Maḥles. The Atābak found himself caught between the shah and the Maḥles; a clerical party to support the court in its struggle against the Maḥles had been established by Shaikh Faḥlallāh Nūrī; and within the Maḥles "moderate" and "extremist" groups had come into being. Behbahānī maintained cordial relations with the Atābak, despite the ambiguities of the minister's position, and at the same time vigorously combated the efforts of Shaikh Faḥlallāh Nūrī to portray the constitution as opposed to religion. This he did primarily with telegrams to provincial cities and to Naḥaf, denouncing the activities of Nūrī, and ultimately obtaining a condemnation of him by the influential *moḥtaheds* of Naḥaf (Kasravī, *Mašrūḥa*⁵, pp. 372-73; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* II, p. 167; "Do maktūb rāje' be tārīk-e mašrūḥiyat," *Yādgar* 3, 1325 Š./1946-47, pp. 30-36). Two of Behbahānī's contemporaries, Dawlatābādī and Mahdī-qolī Khan Hedāyat, blame him for driving Nūrī into hostility to the Maḥles by refusing to share with him any of the power and influence he had accumulated (*Tārīk-e mo'āšer* II, p. 108; *Kāḥerāt va kaḥarāt*, p. 164). Within the Maḥles, Behbahānī aligned himself with the moderates, seeking to prevent the enactment of any legislation incompatible with Islamic law, and trying to avoid breach between the court and the Maḥles (Kasravī, *Mašrūḥa*⁵, p. 286; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* III, p. 204). The impatience of the radical wing of the Maḥles led to a sharpening of tensions and the assassination of the Atābak while emerging from the Maḥles in the company of Behbahānī on 21 Raḥab 1325/31 August, 1907 (Kasravī, *Mašrūḥa*⁵, p. 447). Thereafter the hostility of the shah to the Maḥles continually increased, and matters were not helped by persistent conflicts within the Maḥles. Behbahānī insisted on subordinating the operations of the Ministry of Justice to his own dictates (Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo'āšer* II, pp. 213, 239-40, 248).

The rivalries within the Maḥles were brought to an abrupt end by the royal coup d'état of 23 Jomādā I 1326/23 June 1908, when the Maḥles was bombarded and its members dispersed. With his universally acknowledged courage, Behbahānī made his way to the Maḥles on the day of the bombardment, later seeking refuge in the garden of Amīn-al-dawla behind the Maḥles building. There he was discovered by the royal troops, beaten, stripped, insulted, and borne off to the royalist camp at Bāḡ-e Šāh. Taken into the presence of



Moḥammad ‘Alī Shah, he insisted on being courteously addressed by the monarch. He was provided with traveling expenses and sent under armed guard for expulsion to the ‘*atabāt*, by way of Kermānšāh. The governor of Kāneqīn refused Behbahānī and his party entry to Ottoman territory, and he was obliged to live under guard at the village of Bezehrūd in Kurdistan for eight months before being able to proceed to Najaf in Rabī‘ I, 1327/March, 1909 (Kasravī, *Mašrūṭa*⁵, pp. 643-47, 676; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* IV, pp. 110-15; Ḥāshim-al-dawla, *Asnād-e tārīk-e vaqāye‘-e mašrūṭa-ye Īrān*, ed. Jahāngīr Qā‘emmaqāmī, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969, pp. 46-64). Soon after the constitutionalist forces had conquered Tehran and overthrown Moḥammad ‘Alī Shah in July, 1909, Behbahānī returned to Tehran, with the evident intention of resuming his dominant role. This time he had no formal mandate in the Maḥles, but continued to be active in promoting his interests and those of his followers; and his residence again took on the aspect of a minor court. The new Maḥles saw a recrudescence of the former division into moderates and extremists (i.e., the Social Democrats), the latter wing being led by the deputy from Tabrīz, Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāda. The moderates were able to obtain a condemnation of his attitudes as irreligious by the *mojtaheds* of Najaf, and it was thought that Behbahānī was instrumental in this move. Partly as a result of this, and partly as a result of old resentments of Behbahānī’s autocratic ways, he was assassinated in his home on 8 Raḥab 1328/16 July 1910, by four men associated indirectly with the Social Democrats. No direct link could be established between the murderers and Taqīzāda; but he was widely suspected of responsibility and found it prudent to leave Tehran for Tabrīz and Istanbul (Dawlatābādī, *Tārīk-e mo‘āšer* III, pp. 128-29, 136-37; Malekzāda, *Tārīk-e enqelāb* III, pp. 212-19; Mahdī-qolī Khan Hedāyat, *Kāṭerāt va kaṭarāt*, p. 211; Kasravī, *Āzarbāyḡān*³, pp. 130-32).

Estimates vary of Behbahānī’s career and importance. The accounts of Dawlatābādī and Mahdī-qolī Khan—particularly the former—stress his egoism and ambition; while Nāzem-al-eslām Kermānī suggests, instead, a gradual movement from personal to patriotic motive. By contrast, Taqīzāda—for whatever motive—lavishes praise on Behbahānī as the foremost leader of the constitutional revolution, a man without whose virtues the movement would never have succeeded (“Ašḡāšī,” pp. 65-66; *Tārīk-e avā‘el-e enqelāb-e mašrūṭiyat-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1338 Š./1959, p. 50; “Mašrūṭiyat va Sayyed ‘Abdallāh Behbahānī,” *Maqālāt-e Taqīzāda*, ed. Īraḡ Afšar, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971, II, pp. 174-76). Kasravī and Malekzāda offer a balanced judgment, noting the confluence of ambition with courage and a genuine desire for governmental



reform. Although Behbahānī was not highly regarded as a scholar, he composed a collection of twenty-five treatises on *feqh*, a copy of which is said to exist at the Āstāna-ye Qods library in Mašhad. Among his numerous offspring, Āyatallāh Moḥammad Behbahānī (d. 1383/1963) attained some fame as one of the Tehran ‘*olamā*’ friendly to the court.

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