



# ADMINISTRATION IN IRAN VI. SAFAVID, ZAND, AND QAJAR PERIODS

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## ADMINISTRATION in Iran.

### i. The Safavid, Zand, and Qajar Periods (908-1344/1501-1925)

*The Safavids* (908-1135/1501-1722). The rise of the Safavids was marked by developments that significantly influenced the nature of political, military, and revenue administration: Iran emerged as a modern nation state, Shi'ism was established as the official state religion, and royal absolutism was reinforced by theories of divine right. At its inception, the Safavid state constituted a form of theocracy, in theory there being no separation between religion and state. The shah, claiming descent from the seventh Imam, incorporated in his person both the religious and political leadership of the community. Under the first Safavid ruler, Shah Esmā'īl (907-30/1501-24), the highest officer of the state, the *wakīl-e nafs-e nafīs-e homāyūn*, represented the shah in both these capacities.

Power initially rested in the hands of the leaders of the Qizilbāš tribes who provided the military contingents that had brought about the establishment of the Safavid state. Qizilbāš chiefs were appointed to the office of



*wakīl* and served as *amīr al-omarā'*, the commander of the Qizilbāš forces. Two other leading officials, usually Persians, were the *šadr*, a powerful figure who headed the religious institution, and the *wazīr*, who headed the bureaucracy. But the authority and delimitations of all these offices tended to be ill-defined; the *šadr* intervened in both the civil administration and military affairs, and the *wazīr* was overshadowed by the *wakīl* and by Qizilbāš officers.

Provincial administration was largely in the hands of the Qizilbāš tribal leaders. Royal princes appointed to provincial governorships were accompanied by Qizilbāš *wazīrs*, who assisted in the administration of the province. A large part of the country was indirectly administered and alienated from the immediate control of the central government. Governors undertook to maintain and provide military contingents in exchange for their appointments, and they generally ran their provinces as they saw fit. According to Chardin, the governors were petty princes, could sub-assign their districts, and remitted only a small part of the revenue to the center.

Among the primary problems faced by the Safavids were the incorporation into the state of the tribal element, particularly the Qizilbāš, and access to adequate revenues to maintain the administration and the military contingents. Once the Safavids came to power, the Qizilbāš tended to constitute an element of instability. There were numerous and sometimes severe outbreaks of Qizilbāš-Persian rivalries as well as factional struggles among the Qizilbāš tribes themselves. In 930-40/1524-33, and 986-96/1578-88, when the ruler was weak, the Qizilbāš sought to seize control of the state and encouraged the royal princes to rebel. At the same time, military forces were essential to defend the frontiers against Ottoman incursions in the northwest and Uzbek incursions in the east. Administrative developments were not unconnected with these problems.

Safavid administration under Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) owed something to trends already evident under earlier rulers, but in his reign these trends were consolidated. Although prominent religious figures continued to exercise influence, the religious institution was increasingly subordinated to the state; the role of the *šadr* declined, and the *mojtaheds* emerged as the exponents of Shi'ite orthodoxy. The office of the *wakīl* lost its importance and the term itself fell into disuse. The *wazīr* who was also known by the title of *šadr-e a'zam* and *e'temād al-dawla*, emerged as the leading official in the bureaucracy. Persian and Georgian elements replaced the Qizilbāš in governorships and other important offices.



To reduce his dependence on the Qizilbāš and tribal military contingents, Shah ‘Abbās formed a body of troops from Georgian, Circassian, and Armenian elements known as *ḡolāms*. Soon numbering about 15,000, they owed loyalty to the person of the shah rather than to tribal leaders. In time, the size of this standing army was raised to some 40,000 and included a royal guard, also composed of *ḡolāms*, as well as musketeers and artillery regiments. To raise the revenues to pay these troops out of the royal treasury, the shah began to extend the crown lands (*kāṣṣa*) at the expense of “state” lands or indirectly administrated areas (*mamālek*). Eventually the crown lands grew to a degree that was detrimental to the prosperity of the country. At the same time, the practice of paying military officers, troops and officials by *toyūl*, or assignments on land, continued. Assessments of the value and revenues derived from these assignments tended to be out of date, to the detriment of the state. As in earlier periods, there was a tendency for the *toyūl* to become alienated from state control and to be converted into private property. Much land was also converted into charitable endowments, or *waqfs*, in part as a means of “legalizing” property that may have been acquired by extra-legal means, in part as protection against possible seizure by the state. In 1015 or 1016/1606-8, Shah ‘Abbās I converted his own considerable private holdings into *waqf*; designating himself and thereafter the ruling monarch as administrator.

There also developed a tendency for the state to resume the direct administration of the provinces. Since the province of Fārs was distant from the frontiers and not threatened by military attack, under Shah Ṣafī (1038-52/1629-41) its governor was dismissed and it was administered directly on the shah’s behalf by an overseer. During the reign of Shah ‘Abbās II (1052-77/ 1642-46), this practice was extended to Qazvīn, Gīlān, Māzandarān, Yazd, Kermān, Khorasan and Azarbaijan. A governor was appointed only in the case of war or military threat.

The extension of the crown lands and the direct administration of the provinces did not lead to improved government. Rather, oppression and economic exploitation grew more severe. Although the governors had remitted little revenue to the center and were not easily subject to state control, at least they had maintained an interest in the prosperity of their provinces. But the shah’s own overseers were employed primarily to maximize revenues.

After Shah ‘Abbās I and particularly following the reign of Shah ‘Abbās II, signs



of decline grew more evident, and this was reflected in the administration. For a variety of reasons the *golām*-based military strength of the state diminished; as a result the country was exposed to external attack and internal rebellion. Fierce rivalries within the ruling family and the confining of the royal princes to the palace led to a succession of weak and indifferent rulers. Shah ‘Abbās I himself abandoned the practice of appointing his sons to important governorships, following the revolt in the name of his son, Moḥammad Bāqer, in 1024/1614-15. He had Moḥammad Bāqer put to death and his two surviving sons blinded. His successors continued to keep their potential heirs in the harem, and in time the eunuchs usurped power. Shah Solaymān (1077-1105/1666-94) is said to have remained in the harem seven years without emerging once. Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn (1105-35/1694-1722) gave his life over to drink and debauchery. The costs of the court and harem mounted, the army and administration were neglected, and abuses and corruption grew.

The breakdown of the frontier defenses was evident as early as 1110/1698-99, when Balūčī tribesmen raided Kermān. The eastern frontier was thereafter repeatedly breached by Ġilzay and Abdālī Afghans. On 14 Moḥarram 1135/25 October 1722, after a siege of six months, Ġilzay Afghans under Maḥmūd entered Isfahan, and an Afghan tribal chief proclaimed himself shah of Persia.

*The Afghans, the Afšārs and the Zands* (1135-93/1722-79). The period between the fall of the Safavids and the rise of the Qajars was marked by recurring periods of anarchy, administrative disintegration and economic decline. The brief period of Afghan dominance (1135-42/1722-29) wreaked havoc on the country. Nāder-qolī Afšār, the later Nāder Shah (1142-60/1729-47), reestablished central control and restored the frontiers of the empire, but his ambitious military campaigns denuded the country of manpower, laid much of the country waste, and exhausted economic resources. Under Karīm Khan Zand (1163-93/1750-79) a degree of internal stability and prosperity returned to the country. But at the death of Karīm Khan, as at the death of Nāder, the government disintegrated and the control of major cities and provinces repeatedly changed hands in the struggle for dominance between various tribal groups. The whole period witnessed a resurgence of tribal authority and a decline in bureaucracy.

Under Karīm Khan, as A. K. S. Lambton suggests (“The Tribal Resurgence,” pp. 112-13), there was to some degree a return to the ideal of rule by the tribal khan; accessible to all his subjects, he was limited in power by the practice of consulting with members of the tribe or with others associated with him in



administering the country. Karīm Khan refrained from assuming the throne and pretended to rule in the name of the Safavids; at the same time he appears to have promoted the view that he represented the common people. In addition to the title of *wakīl al-dawla* “regent,” by which he was most commonly known, he also seems to have adopted the title *wakīl al-ra’āyā* “representative of the subjects.”

Karīm Khan did not reconstitute the empire as it had existed under the Safavids and Nāder Shah. He never established his rule over Khorasan, Astarābād, or the Caucasian districts, and only ruled Māzandarān and eastern Iran imperfectly. Due partly to the ruler’s own inclinations and partly to the earlier disorders and consequent administrative decay the bureaucracy under Karīm Khan was reduced in size and scope. He was assisted by a *wazīr* and a chief revenue officer, the *mostawfī al-mamālek*. But no elaborate bureaucracy appears to have existed at the capital, and several of the bureaucratic and military offices prevalent earlier ceased to function. Although there are clear continuities in administrative practice, revenue administration and the system of maintaining troops were greatly simplified. The Safavid distinction between the directly and the indirectly administered provinces largely disappeared and there was a reversion to direct administration by the ruler’s appointees. Karīm Khan named his own kinsmen, as well as tribal chiefs from Fārs and the localities, to provincial governorships. A *wazīr* in charge of revenue and general administration often accompanied the governor. Revenues were to a large extent expended locally by the governor, with the surplus remitted to the center. The elaborate system, afterwards revived by the Qajars, by which the government made assignments against provincial revenues appears to have been abandoned.

As in the Safavid period, there were four large governments: Kurdistan, Lorestān, ‘Arabestān and Georgia. *Beglarbegīs* were appointed to the major provinces: Isfāhan, Azarbaijan, Qarādāg and Qarābāg, and also to some of the major towns. *Ḥākems* were appointed to some two dozen lesser provinces and districts. Several lesser officials were appointed in the major towns. Karīm Khan also made two new appointments in regard to the tribes: He named an *ilkānī* as head of the Lor tribes and an *ilbegī* as chief of all the Qašqāī tribes of Fārs. Karīm Khan’s army consisted of tribal contingents; according to one source, he continued to keep 45,000 troops in his capital, Šīrāz, after he pacified the country.

There appears to have been a decline in the power and influence of the



religious classes, possibly because of their close association with the discredited Safavid dynasty. But the relative weakness of the central government and the rapid turnover of locally dominant tribal chiefs in the period before Karīm Khan was able to consolidate his authority appear to have led to an increase in the influence of local officials such as the *kalāntars* and *kadkodās* of the towns and districts. Some local officials were able to rise to positions of great influence, a situation which was to recur in the period of disorder following the death of Karīm Khan in 1193/1779.

*The Qajars* (1209-1344/1794-1925). Like previous dynasties that rose to power at the head of tribal forces after a period of internal disorder and administrative and economic decline, the Qajars faced the problem of pacifying the country, creating a military and administrative structure adequate for establishing central control, and securing the revenues to maintain the court, bureaucracy, and army. The solutions they attempted were not dissimilar to measures undertaken by previous dynasties. But the Qajar period also witnessed new departures in administration; and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 marks an important break with the past, both in theory and in practice.

Āgā Moḥammad Shah (1209-11/1794-97) assumed the throne after a long struggle among rival claimants. The bureaucracy during his rule remained small. Besides the *wazīr*, the leading men of the administration were the chief revenue officer (*mostawfī*) and the muster-master (*laškarnevīs*) of the army. Under Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah (1211-1250/1797-1834), the bureaucracy was considerably expanded. The *šadr-e aʿzam*, or prime minister, headed the bureaucracy and the *mostawfī al-mamālek* was in charge of revenue and financial administration. *Mostawfīs* worked under the latter in Tehran and were assigned to all the provinces; they were responsible for drawing up the annual tax assessments and registers of authorized expenditures for the provinces, approving assignments on revenue, and verifying the accounts of the provincial governments, army, and other government offices. The *monšī al-mamālek* headed the royal secretarial and the *šāḥeb-edīvān-kāna* was in charge of judicial administration. The *wazīr-e laškar*, as minister of war, was responsible for the administration and finances of the army.

The bureaucracy was gradually expanded. In 1275/1858, there were six ministers: finance, war, foreign affairs, justice, interior, and stipends and endowments. Later, other ministries, such as commerce, agriculture and industry, education, and public works, were added. Other important



departments included the customs, the mint, and the telegraphs.

The provinces were administered by governors appointed by the shah. Under Āgā Moḥammad governorships went primarily to tribal chiefs. During the reign of Fath-‘Alī Shah, the practice of naming the ruler’s sons and other Qajar princes to provincial governorships grew more widespread. Azarbaijan, the richest and most important province, was traditionally the seat of the crown prince. When a royal prince, particularly if young, was appointed to a provincial governorship, he was accompanied by an experienced official (*wazīr* or *pīškār*) who watched over him and administered the province on his behalf. In the later Qajar period, as the importance and role of the bureaucracy grew, men who had risen through the administration were increasingly appointed to important governorships. However, Qajar princes continued to wield great influence. The two eldest sons of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96), Moḥaffar-al-dīn Mīrzā and Zell-al-soltān, held important governorships. After 1295/1878 a third son, Kāmṛān Mīrzā, was named to several important offices.

Governors and other officials were expected to make the shah a gift of money (*pīškaš*) in exchange for their appointments. Moreover, governorships and appointments to other revenue-earning departments, such as the customs, were often farmed out to the highest bidder. Appointees expected to recoup their outlays while in office, and office was widely regarded as a means to personal enrichment. The burden fell most heavily on the peasants and common people. Governors tended to act as military commanders and farm out the taxes of their districts as well; abuses and opportunities for oppression were thus widespread. There was a tendency for powerful governors and officials to escape the control of the central government and for government departments to be alienated from the direct administration of the state, in practice if not in theory. Late in his reign, Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah exercised little control over the customs and the mint, which he had farmed out to various officials, and even over the army finances, which were in the hands of his youngest son. A similar situation had existed in the last years of the reign of Moḥammad Shah (1250-64/1834-48).

The military forces of the Qajars consisted of a small standing army, or royal guard, which never numbered more than a few thousand men, a semi-regular provincial militia, recruited locally, which served only part of the year, and tribal levies which were called up only in time of need. Initially, royal princes also maintained armed contingents, but this practice was largely abandoned



in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the reign of Fath-‘Alī Shah, the crown prince, ‘Abbās Mīrzā, attempted to train and equip regiments along European lines, initially with the assistance of French and then British military advisors, but his attempts proved abortive. Though small provincial garrisons continued to exist on an irregular basis, the Qajars were never able to maintain a large standing army. Late in the reign of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, on paper the standing army stood at 200,000 men and funds were allocated on this basis; but in fact it was estimated to number no more than 30,000 troops. Until the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the only important regular force in the country was the Cossack Brigade, established by Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah in 1879, and this was commanded by Russian officers.

Unlike the Safavids, the Qajars could not claim descent from the Imams. However, they revived the theory of the ruler as the shadow of God on earth. The shah was absolute, all officials were regarded as his servants, and all authority was in theory delegated. But in appointing tribal chiefs, the *kalāntars* of the towns, and the leaders of the Friday prayers in towns and cities, the shah generally had to choose persons acceptable to the local population. The Qajars also insisted on the shah’s right to be the final arbiter in judicial administration, but these royal claims were challenged by the religious classes insofar as religious law was concerned; and provincial governors were not always subject to central control in judicial matters. In 1264-67/1848-50, 1275/1858, 1279/1862 and again in 1287/1871 decrees were promulgated with the intent of bringing both provincial judicial administration and the activities of the religious courts under central supervision, but the long-term effects of these measures were limited.

The major sources of revenue in the Qajar state were the land tax (*mālīyāt*) and the customs duties. Taxes were also levied on sheep and other animals, and in the towns on shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants, bathhouses, caravanserais, and the like. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, customs became a more important source of revenue than the land tax. Rental of government operations, such as the mint and the posts, formed another source of revenue. Finally, there were irregular sources of revenue such as the extraordinary taxes (*ṣāderāt*) imposed to defray the cost, for example, of a royal marriage or military operations, and the *pīškaš* paid to the shah by appointees to office. These revenues were used to maintain the court, the bureaucracy, and the army, the last of which accounted for as much as one-third of total expenditures. The practice of paying officials and the military



through land grants (*toyūl*) continued to be widespread. The finances of the Qajar state were precarious and corruption was widespread. The tendency was for the costs of the bureaucracy and court—chiefly in the form of salaries, pensions and benefits—to grow, while the government remained perennially short of funds.

Throughout the Qajar period there were repeated attempts to bring the finances under control, but never with more than temporary success. For example, at the beginning of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah's reign, the *ṣadr-e a'zam*, Mīrzā Taqī Khan Amīr Kabīr, sought to reorganize the finances, bring tax assessment up-to-date, reduce the rolls of those receiving government salaries and pensions, and exercise greater control over finances. In 1268/1851, however, he was dismissed from office and subsequently executed. Attempts to reform the finances in 1288-90/1871-73, during the prime ministership of Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan Mošīr-al-dawla, also proved abortive. At the end of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah's reign, as at the end of Moḥammad Shah's reign, revenues could not meet even ordinary expenditures and the treasury was virtually empty.

During the reign of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, largely under the impact of ideas received from Europe, there were new departures, at least in the outward form of administration. In 1275/1858, the shah formed a six-man council of ministers which appears to have been modeled after the Russian ministerial council rather than European cabinets. In the following year, he established two advisory councils. The first, the *majles-e šawrā-ye dawlatī*, was composed of eleven ministers, high-ranking officials, and princes. The shah undertook to consult this council on important matters of state. The second body, the *mašlahat-kāna*, was composed of twenty-six officials and personages, generally drawn from the middle ranks of the court and the bureaucracy. The *mašlahat-kāna* was charged with making proposals for “the ordering of affairs, the welfare of the subjects . . . and the progress of the state.” Similar councils were to be established in the provincial capitals. Neither of the two councils appears to have enjoyed a long life.

In 1288/1871, the more important of these two councils was revived as the *dār-al-šawrā-ye kobrā*. Sixteen high-ranking officials and princes were appointed to the council, which was to meet twice a week to deliberate questions put to them by the shah and to advise the ruler. The council, whose membership tended to be somewhat fluid, had no formal authority, failed to meet with regularity, and was frequently ignored. Nevertheless, Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah often consulted with it or with a group of his ministers constituted into a council,



over the next two decades. By 1310/1892-3, the council had been overshadowed by a powerful new prime minister.

In 1289/1872 Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah also attempted to form a European-style cabinet, the *darbār-e a'zam*. The decree establishing it divided the administration into nine ministers constituting a cabinet. Although each minister was to be responsible for the affairs of his own department, the ministers in cabinet were to be jointly responsible for the actions of the government. The prime minister, designated as the *šaḳṣ-e awwal* “first person” in the kingdom, was to be appointed by the shah, while the ministers were to be appointed and dismissed by the prime minister, subject to the shah’s confirmation. The ministers were to report to the prime minister, and only the prime minister was to report to the shah. But the *darbār-e a'zam* was abandoned when Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan Mošīr-al-dawla, the prime minister who had proposed the scheme, fell from office in 1873. A brief attempt in 1291/1874 to reestablish a kind of ministerial cabinet, this time without a prime minister, also proved a failure.

On a number of occasions Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah also attempted to reorganize the administration by redistributing responsibilities among a more limited number of officials. In 1294/1877, he divided responsibility for virtually all the major departments of the government and all the major provinces between two of his leading officials. In 1295/1878 he redistributed offices and provincial governments among these two officials and his youngest son, Kāmṛān Mīrzā; the three men were to run the government in cooperation as a triumvirate. Another reorganization was attempted in 1299/1882; but none of these steps had significant long-term impact on the system of administration.

A decree promulgated in 1292/1875 as the *tanẓīmāt-e ḥasana* also attempted a reorganization of provincial administration. The decree provided for the establishment of a *maǰles-e tanẓīmāt*, a reform or administrative council, in each of the provinces. A *tanẓīmāt* council in Tehran would oversee the work of the provincial councils. The councils, composed of six local government officials, were to check abuses in provincial tax and financial administration and in military conscription, bring tax assessments and pension and salary lists up-to-date, systematize internal tariffs and tolls, act as a check on the provincial governor and prevent judicial and other abuses, and generally act as the representative of the central government in the provinces. *Tanẓīmāt* councils were subsequently established in a number of provincial centers, but their authority was more limited than had been foreseen. The council



established in Rašt had to be suspended due to opposition from the 'olamā' and provincial notables, a development which may have occurred elsewhere. A decree issued by the *šawrā-ye tanzīmāt* in 1303/1885-66 attempted once again to reform provincial tax collection and revenue administration and to define the financial responsibility of the governors. The decree would indicate that the Tehran *tanzīmāt* council, at least, continued to exist, although the over-all project for reform of provincial administration had by then proved a failure.

No major developments in administration occurred in the early years of the reign of Moẓaffar-al-dīn Shah (1313-24/1896-1907). In 1906, however, public demonstrations and protests forced Moẓaffar-al-dīn to agree to the demand for a constitution.

*The constitutional period to the rise of Rezā Khan (1324-39/1906-21).* The constitution of 1906 and the supplementary laws of 1907 incorporated important changes in the concept of government and implied major new departures in the system of administration. The constitution recognized the people as a second source of sovereignty after the divine beneficence. It guaranteed them, within limits, certain basic rights and established protection against the violation of life and property. It severely curtailed the authority of the ruler, recognized the existence of three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) and vested the legislative authority in a national consultative assembly (*majles-e šawrā-ye mellī*), elected by limited male suffrage. The constitution also provided for the creation of a body of civil law and the establishment of civil courts and an executive branch based on cabinet-style government.

Measures adopted by the new assembly began a process that would in time alter the system of administration. In 1907, the assembly curtailed, or abolished, pensions and salaries granted to influential individuals, ended the system of tax farming, and abolished the system of *toyūl*. A. K. S. Lambton regards this last measure as marking the close of the medieval period (*Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, p. 179). Foreign advisors were employed in 1910-11 to reorganize the customs, the financial administration, and the judiciary; they also helped establish a gendarmerie. In the judicial sphere, a measure to establish a system of civil courts was promulgated in 1907, a new penal code in 1912, and a commercial code in 1915. Laws for the establishment of provincial councils and for the reorganization of provincial government were approved in 1907. Legislation was also passed enabling the establishment and internal organization of various ministries. Much of this



legislation was not realized in practice, but these measures provided the foundation for the extensive body of laws that was introduced following the coup d'état that brought Reżā Khan to power in February 1921 and which, in the Pahlavi era, was to transform the system of administration.

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