



AḤMAD SHAH QĀJĀR

AḤMAD SHAH QĀJĀR (1909-1925), the seventh and last ruler of the Qajar dynasty. He was declared shah of Iran on 16 July 1909, the same day his father, Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah (1906-1909), was deposed. Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah was considered to have lost his right to the throne by opposing and seeking the overthrow of the constitutional order and by taking bast, or sanctuary, in the Russian embassy when the armed contingents of the constitutionalists seized control of Tehran.

In view of the unhappy record of the Qajar rulers, opinion at the time favored the deposition of the Qajars and the installation of a new dynasty. But the constitutionalists were shrewd enough to foresee that complications might arise under Article 7 of the Treaty of Torkamānčāy of 1828, by which the Russian government recognized the succession to the throne to lie in the direct male heirs of ʿAbbās Mīrzā, son and heir-apparent to Fath-ʿAlī Shah. The Russians had always interpreted this article to imply that while individual rulers could be removed from the throne, the continuity of the dynasty itself must not be affected.

Thus, after long and careful deliberations, and in keeping with Article 37 of the constitution, the leaders of the constitutional movement agreed to confer the crown on the deposed shah's eldest son. The young prince's parents, about to go into exile abroad, were reluctant to part with him; but a constitutional crisis was avoided when they were persuaded to surrender the boy-king to a delegation of constitutionalists (E. G. Browne, *The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909*, Cambridge, 1910, p. 326). Aḥmad Shah was only twelve years of age



when he succeeded his father. The venerable ‘Azod-al-molk (head of the Qajar tribe) was named regent. A wise and honest counselor, he did much to dispel the mistrust and ill-feeling generated during the reign of Moḥammad-‘Alī Shah. A directorate of elder statesmen established to run the country until the convening of the new parliament, named Mostawfī-al-mamālek, a popular nobleman, to the influential post of minister of the court and a distinguished democrat, Ḥakīm-al-molk, to serve as Mostawfī’s right hand man. Ḥakīm-al-molk was charged with purging the court of undesirable elements and did so with considerable vigor and integrity, dismissing numerous unworthy tutors and officials and corrupt courtiers.

Among the first to go was a certain Russian captain, Smirnov, whom Moḥammad-‘Alī Shah had appointed to teach his son Russian. Smirnov was rightly suspected by the constitutionalists of being a Russian agent; but the Russian embassy, insisting that Smirnov acted only as a tutor, objected to his dismissal and dropped hints that Russia was prepared to recall half of the Russian troops stationed at Qazvīn if Smirnov was allowed to stay (S. Ḥ. Taqīzāda, *Keṭāba-ye āqā-ye Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzāda moštamel bar šamma-ī az tārik-e awā’el-e enqelāb o mašrūṭiyat-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1338 Š./1959, p. 89). The Russian intercession was vigorously opposed and finally rejected by the constitutionalists, who argued that a man the Russians considered worth 2,000 soldiers could not be trusted to remain at the court. Modern scholars of character and integrity, such as Ḍokā’-al-molk Forūgī, Ḍokā’-al-dawla Ğaffārī and Kamāl-al-molk were named to replace the departing teaching staff. The education of the young king thus passed into the hands of men whose sole aim was to make Aḥmad Shah into a genuine constitutional monarch. When ‘Azod-al-molk died on 22 September 1910, he was replaced as regent by Abu’l-Qāsem Nāṣer-al-molk, an Oxonian who counted among his contemporaries at Oxford Lord Curzon and Sir Edward Grey, both destined to become British foreign secretaries in the next decade.

Ḥakīm-al-molk and Mostawfī succeeded in removing many harmful influences from Aḥmad Shah’s immediate entourage. But they failed to realize the goal of turning the shah into a model king, for they were unable to protect him from undesirable influences within the court and his immediate family. Uncles, aunts, cousins, had unhampered access to Aḥmad Shah. A leading figure was the shah’s maternal grandfather, Kāmṛān Mīrzā. A powerful reactionary and sworn enemy of the new order, Kāmṛān Mīrzā worked to poison the young shah’s mind against his distinguished state counselors and to make him



believe that they had betrayed his father. When Aḥmad Shah came of age, he possessed all the qualities of a bad king: He was timid and unable to make clear decisions, lacked strength of character, loved to indulge in pleasure, tended towards bribe-taking, and was avaricious to an almost uncontrollable degree.

Thus, although Aḥmad Shah's coronation on 21 July 1914 was marked by national jubilation, his popularity rapidly declined. He interfered in political appointments that lay outside his jurisdiction; he engaged in corrupt practices that came to be widely known, for example in grain speculation, in order to augment his already considerable fortune; and his avariciousness was noted even by foreign observers, including the British minister to Tehran, who reported in a dispatch that the best way to keep the shah well-disposed towards England was "to give him, or obtain for him, as much money as we can for that is what he loves most in the world" (Norman to Curzon, 25 June 1920, *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, first series, XIII, London, 1963, p. 538).

The first four years of Aḥmad Shah's direct reign coincided with World War I and the occupation of Iran by various belligerent troops. During these eventful years, Aḥmad Shah played only a small part in the internal politics of his country, on the whole doing what his counselors (some pro-German, some pro-British, some pro-Russian) advised him to do. In November, 1915, urged by the Germans, a large number of Majlis deputies and elder statesmen quit the capital and transferred their base of operations first to Qom and eventually to Kermānshāh, where they established a rival, nationalist government. Aḥmad Shah at first appeared inclined to join them and to transfer his capital farther south; but he was dissuaded from doing so by the British and Russian ministers in Tehran.

Another decisive moment in Aḥmad Shah's reign came at the end of the war when he was induced, partly by pecuniary incentives, to give his consent to the conclusion of a treaty, the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, with England. If implemented, the treaty would have put an end to Iran's political independence and for all practical purposes made England Iran's guardian and protector. Aḥmad Shah was to receive a subsidy of 15,000 tomans per month as long as he kept in office his pro-British prime minister, Woṭūq-al-dawla (*Documents XIII*, p. 518). On the Iranian side Woṭūq was the chief architect of the treaty, and the British considered his continuation in office essential to the treaty's ratification and implementation.



The agreement was deeply resented in France and openly denounced by the American minister in Tehran, who promised the Iranian nationalists his country's full support in resisting this colonial pact (M. T. Bahār, *Tārīk-emoktašar-e aḥzāb-e sīāsī*, vol. I: *Enqerāz-e salṭanat-e Qājāriya*, Tehran, 1323 Š./1944, p. 39). Three days after the agreement was signed, the shah left for an official visit to England. Given a cool reception in France, for the first time he became aware of the terrible blunder he had made in acquiescing to the treaty. Consequently, at a reception held in his honor in London, he intentionally refrained from including in his official speech any reference which could have been construed as an endorsement of the Anglo-Persian Agreement. It has become part of the legend of his deposition from the throne that his "patriotic gesture" so annoyed his British hosts that they decided to overthrow the Qajar dynasty and assisted Reżā Khan in doing so in 1925; but British Foreign Office documents provide ample proof that this was not the case and that his fall from power was due to circumstances unrelated to the London banquet. The Anglo-Persian Agreement itself was finally abrogated in 1921, when successive Iranian cabinets found themselves unable to submit it to Parliament for approval. The repudiation by the U.S. Congress of the Versailles treaty, after it had been signed by President Wilson, also may have created a precedent on which Iran seized (H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919-1925*, Boston, 1934, pp. 141-42).

Another major crisis facing the country and the young shah at the end of the war was caused by the presence on Iranian territory of foreign troops, including the British forces that controlled much of the country. The British-commanded South Persia Rifles were in the south, the Dunsterforce (later known as the North Persia Force, or Norperforce) occupied the Qašr-e Širīn-Kermānšāh-Hamādān-Qazvīn line, and other British contingents were based in Mašhad. On 18 May 1920, the Soviets landed troops at the port of Anzālī (later Bandar Pahlavī) and proceeded to occupy the province of Gīlān, announcing they would remain until British forces were withdrawn. Iran took its case to the newly established League of Nations; but that august body proved ineffective.

Eventually, following prolonged and critical negotiations in Tehran and Moscow that culminated in a personal interview with Lenin by the Iranian envoy, 'Alī-qolī Khan Anšārī, the Soviet government agreed to withdraw Russian troops if Britain withdrew her own forces from Iranian territory. This understanding was incorporated into the Irano-Soviet Friendship Treaty of



1921. The British had already decided on a withdrawal from Iran; and the date for Russian troop withdrawal was set for 1 April 1921. The account of these events lies outside the scope of this article, but Aḥmad Shah's behavior throughout this crisis was lamentable. His thoughts and deeds were centered on one single object: to save himself and his fortune before Tehran fell to the Bolsheviks, whose advance on the capital seemed imminent. He continued to press Norman, the British minister in Tehran, to acquiesce to his departure for Europe, ostensibly for reasons of health. But it was clear to Norman that the shah was motivated by fear, and that he intended to wait out the crisis abroad, returning to Iran if it passed, but remaining in Europe if the Bolsheviks took over (*Documents XIII*, p. 678). Curzon instructed Norman to tell the shah his departure would be construed as an act of cowardice and that "were he to decide to run away he could in no circumstances expect the slightest support and help from us" (*ibid.*, p. 686). The shah was thus forced to remain. But his intention to leave the country to its fate and save his own vast fortune at the first convenient opportunity remained unchanged.

Aḥmad Shah's position was considerably affected when on 21 February 1921—exactly 40 days before the British troops were to begin their evacuation of Iran—a division of the Persian Cossack brigade under the command of Reżā Khan marched from Qazvīn to Tehran and occupied the capital. The action by Reżā Khan and his colleagues came at a moment of national crisis and a general belief that upon the withdrawal of British and Soviet forces local communist forces in Gīlān would march on Tehran and the shah's government would collapse. With the arrival of the Cossacks in Tehran, the cabinet fell and the feeble prime minister, Faṭḥallāh Akbar, took sanctuary in the British embassy. The shah was persuaded to appoint a young pro-British journalist, Sayyed Żīā'-al-dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, as prime minister, but the real power behind the government was Reżā Khan.

The shah appointed Reżā Khan commander-in-chief of the armed forces with the title Sardār-e Sepah. Two months later, Reżā Khan entered the cabinet, replacing Colonel Mas'ūd Khan Kayhān, Sayyed Żīā's right-hand man, as minister of war. From this moment, Reżā Khan became the real power in Iran behind the making and unmaking of successive cabinets. The political history of Iran during the remaining four years of Aḥmad Shah's reign is the story of the struggle for supremacy between a frightened, weak, and pleasure-loving monarch and an astute and powerful minister of war aspiring to the throne.

The Soviet government hastened to reach an understanding with Reżā Khan



and agreed to withdraw their support from the Gīlān rebels under Mīrzā Kūček Khan. Reżā Khan shortly thereafter invaded Gīlān and defeated Mīrzā Kūček Khan's forces. Other rebellions were crushed, considerably adding to Reżā Khan's standing. On 28 October 1923, Reżā Khan induced a reluctant Aḥmad Shah to appoint him prime minister. In return, Reżā Khan agreed to facilitate the shah's immediate departure for Europe. The journey was undertaken ostensibly for the purpose of medical treatment abroad, although the shah, from the safety of the south of France, subsequently sought to engineer an armed rebellion against Reżā Khan with the help of his trusted ally, Shaikh Kaẓ'al of Kūzestān. Aḥmad Shah feared that Reżā Khan had posted agents along the royal route to kill him; to calm his anxieties, Reżā Khan accompanied him to the Iranian frontier. He left the country on 5 November 1923, destined never to return to Iran.

Established in France, Aḥmad Shah now became chiefly an observer of the events that took place in Iran, although he attempted, with little success, to influence their course. With the shah's departure, an extensive campaign, encouraged by Reżā Khan, was initiated in favor of the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic on the model of neighboring Turkey. On 13 March 1924, the Majlis met in extraordinary session and appointed a special committee to consider the question of proclaiming a republic. However, the Turkish Grand National Assembly had on March 3 passed three laws abolishing the caliphate, suppressing the ministry of religious affairs and the system of *awqāf* (religious endowments) and placing all religious schools and seminaries under the national ministry of education. These developments made a deep impression on the Iranian '*olamā*', who feared that the proclamation of a republic in Iran would have similar consequences for the role of Islam and the religious establishment in their country (*Survey of International Affairs* 3, 1925, p. 537). They threw themselves into the anti-republican campaign and incited the people to invade Bahārestān Square, where the Majlis was on the point of debating the proposed constitutional changes. The assembly adjourned without reaching a decision, and Reżā Khan soon thereafter journeyed to Qom, where he conferred with the powerful religious leaders. On his return to Tehran on April 1, he recommended that all discussion on establishing a republic cease.

From Paris Aḥmad Shah sought to turn this agitation to his own advantage. In March, 1924, he wired Reżā Khan instructing him to suppress the republican movement. In April, in a wire to the Majlis, he expressed his lack of confidence



in Reżā Khan (although he subsequently approved his reappointment as prime minister). He appears also to have remained in touch with the powerful Shaikh Każ'al and to have encouraged his rebellion against the central government. In November, Reżā Khan marched to Kūzestān where he secured Każ'al's submission. This greatly enhanced Reżā Khan's standing and he began to encourage a movement for the transfer of the crown from Aḥmad Shah to himself. Hoping to head off this movement and encouraged by politicians opposed to Reżā Khan, in September, 1925, Aḥmad Shah announced in a telegram to Reżā Khan his intention to sail from Marseilles on October 2 and return to Iran. However, he did not do so; and Reżā Khan was now too powerful and the shah too discredited for the movement to depose the Qajars to be reversed. On 31 October 1925, the Majlis approved a bill deposing the Qajars and entrusting the provisional government to Reżā Khan. Eighty deputies voted in favor of the bill, twenty abstained, and only five opposed it. On December 12, a special constituent assembly modified articles 36, 37, 38, and 40 of the constitution and by a vote of 257 to 3 conferred the crown on Reżā Shah and his male heirs. The assembly's resolutions stipulated that no member of the Qajar family could ever accede to the throne. Thus ended the reign of Aḥmad Shah and the 130-year-old Qajar dynasty.

The deposed shah subsequently took up permanent residence in France. He died four years later at the age of 32. According to French newspaper reports at the time, he left behind a considerable fortune, estimated at 75 million francs.

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