



## 'ALĪ KANĪ

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'ALĪ KANĪ, MOLLĀ (1220-1306/1805-88), an influential and wealthy *mojtahed* of Tehran who played a decisive role in obtaining the cancellation of the Reuter Concession in 1873. Born to a religious scholar, Qorbān-'Alī, in the village of Kan about twelve km northwest of Tehran, he studied first in Tehran and then, according to some accounts, in Isfahan. Too poor to proceed to the *'atabāt* to embark on advanced religious studies, he had to wait until the task of conveying the body of a certain Ḥājġ Moḥsen to Karbalā for burial presented him with the opportunity to travel. Once in Karbalā, he began studying *oṣūl* with Āqā Sayyed Ebrāhīm Qazvīnī, the author of *al-Žawābet*, and with Šarīf-al-'olamā' Māzandarānī. He also spent some time in Najaf, studying *feqh* with the author of *al-Jawāher*, Shaikh Moḥammad Ḥasan Sedehī Najafī, who awarded him a certificate of *ejtehād* in 1262/1846 (Figure 1).

On his return to Tehran, which took place in the same year, Mollā 'Alī Kanī was again faced with penury, but the gift of a disused irrigation canal that he swiftly restored to operation put him on the road to prosperity. The water from his canal was eagerly bought because of its supposedly unusual fertilizing properties, and with the money he obtained, Kanī began to acquire further canals and also land. At the same time, the *Šarī'a* court he established gradually became the most influential of its kind in Tehran, earning for him the title of *ra'īs al-mojtahedīn* ("chief of the *mojtaheds*"). Thanks to the efforts of a certain Sayyed Bāqer Jamārānī Nežām-al-'olamā', he recruited so many friends and agents in the bureaucracy that all *Šarī'a* cases concerning the government were referred to him for judgment. One consequence of the



influence he thus acquired was that deeds of ownership would be sent to him from places as far distant as Shiraz, Isfahan, and Khorasan; the seal that he affixed to them, for a fee, guaranteed landowners security of tenure. His standing with the government also enabled him to obtain the temporary imposition of the *ḡezya* on Jews and Christians resident in Tehran.

Kanī appears to have been on friendly terms with Qājār princes such as 'Abbās Mīrzā Molkārā (see Molkārā, *Šarḥ-e ḡāl*, ed., 'A. Navā'ī, Tehran, 1325 Š./1946, pp. 58-59) and Farḡād Mīrzā Mo'tamad-al-dawla (see Mo'tamad-al-dawla, *Hedāyat al-sabīl*, Tehran 1294/1877, p. 1). Despite these ties to the state, he clashed decisively with its authority on the important issue of the Reuter Concession. Objecting to the comprehensive surrender of Iranian resources proposed in the concession, he persuaded a number of provincial '*olamā*' such as Sayyed Jawād of Qom, Mīrzā Maḡmūd of Borūjerd, and Mīrzā Jawād Āqā of Tabrīz to join him at the shrine of Shah 'Abd-al-'Aẓīm in a collective protest (*bast*). From there he wrote a letter to Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, severe and uncompromising in its tone, demanding the rescinding of the concession, as contrary to Islam, and the dismissal of the two persons chiefly responsible for its having been granted: Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan Sepahsālār, the chief minister, and Mīrzā Malkom Khan, his adviser. He was particularly adamant on the necessity of removing Malkom Khan from all governmental positions, describing him as a "sworn enemy of religion" on account of his Masonic activities (the full text of Mollā 'Alī Kanī's letter is given in E. Teymūrī, '*Aṣr-e bīḡabarī yā tāriḡ-e emtiāzāt dar Īrān*, Tehran, 1336 Š./1957, pp. 124-26). In addition, he issued a *fatwā* declaring the dismissal of Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan to be *wāḡeb* (religiously incumbent). A court faction hostile to Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan lent its support to the campaign that Mollā 'Alī Kanī had inaugurated; in September, 1873, Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan was dismissed and two months later the concession he had promoted was abolished.

Mollā 'Alī Kanī has had a mixed reputation. The judgments he delivered in his *Šarī'a* court were generally held to be honest (see S. G. W. Benjamin, *Persia and the Persians*, London, 1887, p. 441), but he was often accused of venality and rapacity. For example, his archenemy, Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan, charged him with hoarding the grain produced on his extensive land holdings and then selling it at extortionate prices, thus contributing materially to the famine of 1288/1871 (see his letter to Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah dated 28 Raḡab 1290/20 September 1873, quoted in Teymūrī, '*Aṣr-e bīḡabarī*, p. 44). Kanī is also said to have annually expelled the prostitutes of Tehran from the city so that the chief of police and



the governor of the city might extort money from them before permitting them to return (see M. Ḥ. E'temād-al-salṭana, *Waqāye'-e rūzāna-ye darbār*, Tehran, n.d., p. 110). All such accusations of greed and dishonesty have recently been disputed by Āyatallāh Maṛ'ašī Najafī, who, basing himself on family lore, has asserted that Kanī was, on the contrary, a charitable and kindly man who supported numerous orphans and widows and regularly provided the poor with free medicine (see anon., "Yādvāra-ye Ḥājj Mollā 'Alī Kanī," *Payām-e enqelāb*, no. 71, 22 Ābān 1361/13 November 1982, pp. 44).

Despite the great influence Kanī wielded in Tehran, he does not appear to have trained any pupils of significance. Shaikh Moḥammad Bāqer Najmābādī, Sayyed Moḥammad Lavāsānī, and Āqā Sayyed Moḥammad Ḥayātšāhī are, however, recorded to have studied with him. Some of his writings are well-regarded, especially *al-Qazā' wa'l-šahāda*, a book on the duties and qualities of a judge and the rules of evidence that compares favorably with his own teacher's *al-Jawāher* (see *al-Ḍarī'a* III, pp. 482-83). *Tawzīḥ al-maqāl fi 'elm ad-derāya wa'l-rejāl*, a handbook of the science of tradition to which he appended a brief autobiography (see *al-Ḍarī'a* IV, p. 497); and *Talkīš al-masā'el*, a book on *forū'* (an apparently complete list of Kanī's writings is given in M. 'A. Modarres, *Rayḥānat al-adab*, Tabrīz, n.d., V, p. 98)

Mollā 'Alī Kanī died on 27 Moḥarram 1306/3 October 1888, and was buried three days later at Shah 'Abd-al-'Azīm. He left behind three sons, Ḥājj Shaikh 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn, Ḥājj Shaikh Ja'far, and Shaikh Moḥammad-Taqī; two daughters; and a fortune estimated at 1.5 million tomans (see E'temād-al-salṭana, *Rūz-nāma-ye kāterāt*, ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, pp. 680-81).

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