



ALLĀH-QOLĪ KHAN ĪLKĀNĪ

ALLĀH-QOLĪ KHAN ĪLKĀNĪ (sometimes Allāh-qolī Mirzā), Qajar notable (ca. 1236-1309/1820-1892). Son of Mūsā Khan and grandson of Ḥosayn-qolī Khan, he was both Faḥr-ʿAlī Shah’s fraternal nephew and grandson by his daughter ‘Ezzat Nesā’. He was brought up in the shah’s household (*andarūn*). Because of his grandmother’s influence, the shah looked upon him as his own son (ʿAzod-al-dawla, *Tārīk-e ʿAzodī*, pp. 29-30). He is known for his unusual indulgence in sensual pleasures, much in the style of his grandfather Faḥr-ʿAlī Shah. In 1250/1834-35 Allāh-qolī’s mother was pressured into marrying Ḥājjī Mirzā Āqāsī, who was made grand vizier in the same year. While still in his early twenties, Allāh-qolī was appointed to the largely ceremonial but important office of *īlkānī* (chief) of the Qajar tribe. Āqāsī should thus have been enabled to exercise some control over the unpredictable tribal chiefs, but this proved a formidable task, not so much because of the pleasure-seeking Allāh-qolī’s excesses or notorious rogueries, but more because of the unconcealed hostility of the discontented Qajar notables, who saw his rise as a deliberate attempt to sully their tribal honor.

By the late 1250s/early 1840s, Moḥammad Shah’s unreserved support for Āqāsī allowed Allāh-qolī Khan to cease being a mere puppet and become “a channel for petition and access” (Sepéhr, *Nāseḵ al-tawārīk* III, p. 57). Moreover, his tested loyalty to Āqāsī provided the latter with an alternative source of support whenever his position was undermined by intrigues of other factions. In reward Allāh-qolī Khan was left to surround himself with a host of outcast libertines and young debauchees—often second generation Qajar



princes—and with an army of *lūṭīs*, procurers, stylish pederasts, and courtesans. “Intercession and interference in the affairs of government” (*Rawzat al-ṣafā* X, p. 290) soon turned his night-long parties into a venue for notables and courtiers who intended to manipulate him not only for their own immediate ends but also to cause embarrassment to Āqāsī.

In 1259-60/1843-44, deterioration in Moḥammad Shah’s health brought a political crisis and severely shook Āqāsī’s power base; both Āqāsī and his opponents began to toy with the idea of encouraging Allāh-qolī Khan into an ambiguous claim to the throne. While the premier’s ultimate aim was to bring one of his own subordinates to power in case of the shah’s death, his more immediate plan was to deceive his enemies, and to a degree he was successful. One of the most influential factions opposed to him, that of Moḥammad-qolī Khan the Īṣīk Āqāsī (chief of protocol) and his father Allāhyār Khan Āṣaf-al-dawla, the vice-regent of Khorasan, supported Allāh-qolī in the hope that he would eliminate the other powerful factions, most noticeably that of Manūčehr Khan Mo’tamad-al-dawla; they were then planning to attack him on the pretext of suppressing a rebellious pretender, to destroy the chief instigator, Āqāsī, and to bring their own puppet, Bahman Mīrzā, to the throne. As the Qajar chroniclers put it, because of the “provocations of evil-doers” and “flatteries of sycophants” (*Nāseḵ al-tawārīk* III, p. 67), Allāh-qolī “inclined from the state of servitude towards an ambitious position” (*Rawzat al-ṣafā* X, p. 290); he openly claimed that, as the grandson of Ḥosayn-qolī Khan, he was the rightful heir to the Qajar throne (*Kāṭerāt-e Momtaḥen-al-dawla*, p. 299). Because of his total reliance on Āqāsī, Moḥammad Shah responded mildly, in spite of vigorous reporting by Āqāsī’s enemies. Āqāsī convinced the shah only to compel Allāh-qolī to leave the capital and buy the governorship of Borūjerd. Not much later, in 1261/1845, a severe attack of gout cast further doubts on Moḥammad Shah’s survival and temporarily deprived Āqāsī of his main source of support. Allāh-qolī’s hasty return to Tehran seems to have been part of Āqāsī’s contingency plan to deal with a wave of opposition. Allāh-qolī recruited five hundred musketeers and moved from the citadel to the newly built Bahārestān, where he awaited news of the shah’s demise. Much to Āqāsī’s relief, the shah’s partial recovery removed the danger, at least temporarily, while he was able to vindicate Allāh-qolī by putting the blame on the “real culprits.” In a series of skillful maneuvers he persuaded the monarch to carry out a purge and send his political opponents into exile, while reinstating Allāh-qolī in his governorship. To prove his loyalty, Allāh-qolī exposed an alleged plot by Moḥammad-qolī and Āṣaf-al-dawla to overthrow



the shah. He thus helped intensify the secessionist tendencies in Khorasan that eventually led to the Sālār revolt of 1263-67/1847-51.

In the following months, Allāh-qolī was encouraged in his drive for power by Manūčehr Khan, who hoped to make Allāh-qolī less affordable to Āqāsī, though ‘Ezzat Nesā’s influence made him indispensable. Āqāsī’s dilemma became more serious when the provincial minister Maḥmūd Khan Šabā secretly reported from Borūjerd on Allāh-qolī’s activities. It was alleged that, in collaboration with certain tribal chieftains, he was preparing to proceed to Tehran, make a surprise attack on the capital, and kill the shah on his hunting ground. Whatever Allāh-qolī’s intentions, the report (publicized by the poet laureate Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Khan Šabā, father of Maḥmūd and the chronicler Sepehr) left Āqāsī with no choice but to endorse Allāh-qolī’s exile to the ‘Atabāt (Rabī’ I, 1262/March, 1846); thus he reluctantly lost a useful stooge and suffered an embarrassment welcomed both by Manūčehr Khan and the Nūrī faction.

Little is known of Allāh-qolī’s twenty-five year residence in the Ottoman Empire (1262-87/1846-71). The greater part was spent in Iraq where he was supported by a pension from the Iranian government. Accompanied by his entourage, he seldom seems to have given up his accustomed lifestyle. In Baghdad or Istanbul he became acquainted with Mīrzā Ḥosayn Khan Mošīr-al-dawla Sepahsālār, who during his premiership secured from Nāšer-al-dīn Shah Allāh-qolī’s safe return to Iran. He was still looked upon with some suspicion, but the memories of his earlier adventures were remote enough to allow him a fitting place amongst the host of non-functional Qajar pensioners who crowded Nāšer-al-dīn court. The shah seemed to have been amused by him and even took pleasure in reading the sensual account of his past debaucheries (see bibliography). Allāh-qolī was included among the shah’s retinue during his first journey to Europe (1299/1873) and later for a while functioned as the “addressee at the royal audience” (*mokāṭab-e salām*). He was appointed once to the state consultative council (1296-98/1879-80), twice to the governorship of Qazvīn (1286/1869 and 1305/1887), and once each to that of Hamadān (1292/1875) and Ḳamsa (1298-99/1880-81). He died in Ša’bān, 1309/March, 1892.

The case of Allāh-qolī Khan clearly demonstrates the complexity of Qajar court politics and the way in which rival factions within the government manipulated divisions in the ruling tribe to gain legitimacy for their own political ends. It shows how Āqāsī’s potentially weak central administration



could maintain the power equilibrium by directing the attention of rival factions towards a spurious pretender. Allāh-qolī is a classic example of a Qajar notable who by virtue of birth and family connection could attain temporary significance. He reflected the grievances of those second-rate and impoverished princes descended from Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah who, after the succession of Moḥammad Shah, took refuge in ĪlĶānī if not in the remote hope of reclimbing the political ladder, at least to share with him the pleasures of the flesh.

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