



JA'FARI, ŠA'BĀN

JA'FARI, ŠA'BĀN (known in Persia as Ša'bān Bimok [simple-minded]; b. Tehran 1921, d. Santa Monica, Calif., 19 August 2006), a *luṭi* of the *jāhel* variety, athlete, and rightwing political agent from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, who later headed Persia's traditional sports establishment (*zur-kāna*).

Early years. Ša'bān Ja'fari was the last of fourteen children. When the Sangelaj quarter of Tehran where the family lived was razed by order of Režā Shah to be replaced by a municipal park, they moved to nearby the Dabbāg Kāna quarter, where his father had a grocery store. As a young child he worked in his father's shop, but ended his formal education after only four grades, having been expelled from several schools for unruly behavior. It was at school that one of his teachers called him *bimok* (simple-minded), a sobriquet, which would stick to him for the rest of his life. He then worked briefly in a foundry, a smithy, and the arsenal. His father died when he was twelve, and soon thereafter he started frequenting the Darḵungāh *zur-kāna* of Sangelaj (see Ja'fari). He quickly gained a reputation as a brawler, and at the age of fifteen went to prison for the first time. In 1940 he started his two-year military service, but ran away from the barracks so often that it took him four years to complete it (Saršār, pp. 21-55). When Ḥabib-Allāh Bolur, a successful wrestler who would in later years become a coach, official, and actor, founded the Āhan Club in 1942 (Abbāsi, p. 383), Ja'fari joined it (Saršār, p. 51). In 1943 he became national champion in *kabbāda* and *čark*, two *zur-kāna* exercises (*Sāl-nāma-ye Pārs*, 1944, p. 93). By now Ja'fari was a typical *luṭi* of the *jāhel* variety, and would often start or get involved in fights. One evening, when the



Ferdowsi Theatre had a private show by leftist artists to which the owners refused him admission, he became violent and was arrested and exiled to Lāhijān, where he married a local girl and ran a *zur-kāna*.

Rightwing political agent. After the war Ja'fari briefly became a sympathizer of the [Fedā'iān-e Eslām](#) and would often attack the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party (see [COMMUNISM ii](#)) activists on the streets of Tehran on behalf of the political establishment (Saršār, pp. 59-65). Ja'fari lived in the same neighborhood as the politician and historian Sayyed Ḥosayn Makki, gravitated towards him, and supported his electoral campaign for the Majles. Through Makki he met Ayatollah Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšāni, whose supporter he became. In addition to Makki and Kāšāni, he was also in touch with Moẓaffar Baqā'i (Saršār, pp. 77-78, 110, Rahnemā, p. 164). Ja'fari continued brawling with Tudeh sympathizers. When on 5 December 1951 pro-Kāšāni and pro-Moṣaddeq demonstrators, who included a sizable contingent of *jāhels*, clashed with Tudeh sympathizers in Tehran and attacked the editorial offices of a number of anti-Moṣaddeq newspapers, both conservative and pro-Tudeh, Ja'fari was among them (Mowaḥḥed, I, pp. 391-93; Rahnemā, pp. 345, 563-67). There are plausible indications that he had been put on the payroll of the police (Rahnemā, pp. 565, 573, 576, and 578), but Ja'fari himself claimed that he accepted no money from the government. He was arrested and went to prison for about five months (Saršār, pp. 91-95, 104. Cf. Rahnemā, pp. 573-74). Some months later, when the Shah dismissed Moṣaddeq as prime minister on 30 Tir 1331 Š./21 July 1952, and appointed Aḥmad Qawām in his stead, Ja'fari was one of the ringleaders of the demonstrations that led to Qawām's resignation and Moṣaddeq's reappointment. According to his own account, he took a few men to the Sinā hospital and stole a few corpses, which they paraded on the streets of Tehran shouting that they were the remains of people Qawām had ordered to be killed (Saršār, pp. 110-11). To show their appreciation, a delegation of National Front leaders visited Ja'fari's sports club on 19 September 1952 (*Bāktar-e emruz*, 20 September 1952, reproduced in Sar-šār, p. 119). Throughout all these eventful months, Ja'fari took his cue in political matters from Ayatollah Kāšāni, and when Kāšāni parted company with Moṣaddeq, Ja'fari followed his lead.

In late February 1952, the Shah, exasperated by the power struggle with Moṣaddeq, decided to leave the country. Although he did not say that he would abdicate, Kāšāni and Ayatollah Sayyed Moḥammad Behbahāni spread rumors to that effect, and invited their followers to congregate at the gates of the



palace to prevent the Shah's departure. In the morning of 9 Esfand 1330 Š./28 February 1952, Kāšāni warned a group of supporters who had assembled in his house that if the Shah left the country, the *ulama's* turbans would go too. Ja'fari thereupon went to the bazaar to rouse the bazaaris, but most of these supported Moṣaddeq, and so his efforts proved fruitless. Ja'fari then led a crowd to Moṣaddeq's house under the pretext of forcing him to prevent the Shah's departure. When they were refused entry, he personally led the attack on the prime minister's house by ramming a jeep into the gate; in the scuffle his nephew was killed (Saršār, pp. 82, 123-28; Rahnemā, pp. 822-35; *New York Times*, 23 August 1953). But Moṣaddeq prevailed in that crisis, and Ja'fari was arrested, tried, and given a one-year prison sentence. He was still in prison when the conflict between Moṣaddeq and the Shah came to a head in the summer of 1953.

It is widely believed that Ja'fari was one of the ringleaders of the demonstrations that accompanied the *coup d'état* of 28 Mordād 1332 Š./19 August 1953. The fact is that he was still in prison when the events began to unfold, and the demonstrations were led by *jāhels* close to Ayatollah Behbahāni (Rahnemā, pp. 956-60). In the afternoon of that day he was freed by order of General Fażl-Allāh Zāhedi (Saršār, pp. 161-62) and joined the pro-Shah street demonstrations. When the Shah returned from his brief exile on 22 August, Ja'fari organized crowds to welcome him.

After the restoration of the Shah, Ja'fari continued his strong-armed activism on behalf of the ruler, for which purpose he founded an organization named Jam'iyat-e javānmardān-e jānbāz (Society of Chivalrous and Selfless Men; Mowahhed, III, pp. 107-8, 130). On 13 March 1954 he roughed up Moṣaddeq's erstwhile foreign minister, Ḥosayn Fāṭemi, in front of the police building, injuring him to the point that he had to be taken to a hospital to be treated for knife wounds. In the elections to the 18th Majles he physically intimidated opponents of General Fażl-Allāh Zāhedi's regime, which was blatantly rigging the elections (*Life*, 22 March 1954, pp. 38-40).

Šābān Ja'fari and traditional athletics. After the coup, the Shah helped Ja'fari establish a modern sports facility dedicated to traditional athletics on the northern edge of the municipal park (Park-e sahr), in the neighborhood in which he grew up, and personally came to inaugurate it in November 1957. The Bāšgāh-e Šābān-e Ja'fari had far more elaborate and well appointed facilities than traditional *zur-kānas*, and included not only showers and training rooms for other disciplines such as wrestling, boxing, and karate, but



also a small museum in which Ja'fari exhibited objects related to traditional athletics (Partow Beyzā'i Kāšāni, pp. 245-46, Ja'fari, personal interview). On 5 June 1963 the club was set on fire during the riots caused by the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom, but Ja'fari managed to rebuild it expeditiously. On most evenings Ja'fari personally led the exercises in the pit (*gowd*), and the club was regularly visited by foreign dignitaries and celebrities (Saršār, pp. 254-68). Ja'fari broke with tradition by allowing women to attend these sessions (ibid, p. 225), for which he was criticized by many veteran athletes (Rochard, p. 71). Until the early 1970s Ja'fari enjoyed personal access to the Shah, and on his birthday (4 Ābān/26 October) would organize mass displays of traditional *zur-ḳāna* exercises involving up to 1,800 athletes as part of the celebrations in Tehran's main stadiums (Saršār, pp. 215, 249-51).

In the 1970s Ja'fari lost his access to the court (Saršār, p. 310). The men and women who now led Iran were embarrassed to be associated with a ruffian like him and gave him the cold shoulder (Foruḡ, p. 47). In the course of the 1978 confrontation between the Shah's regime and its opponents, Ja'fari made half-hearted attempts to recruit *luṭis* to counter the anti-regime demonstrators, but did not have any success (Mirzā'i and Ḥosayni, p. 151). He himself claimed that his proposals to organize a counter-mobilization against the revolutionaries did not meet the approval of the government (Saršār, pp. 337-38).

In the course of the anti-government riots the Ja'fari Club was again attacked and the museum looted. Ja'fari himself fled Iran in January 1979, and after a few peripatetic years spent in Japan, Israel, Germany, Britain, France, Belgium, and Turkey, he settled in Santa Monica, California, where he was looked after in his old age by former acolytes, his wife and only son having remained in Iran (Ja'fari; Saršār, pp. 337-73). He refused to grant interviews about his role in Iranian politics to anyone until 1999, when he consented to tell the story of his life to Homā Saršār. He died on 19 August 2006, the anniversary of the coup against Mošaddeq.

Concluding remarks. For Mohammad Reza Shah's opponents, be they leftists, Mošaddeqists, or Islamists, Ša'bān Ja'fari is one of the most hateful figures of 20th-century Iran, a man who served reactionary causes. While there is general agreement that he had originally been a *čāqukeš* (thug), from the mid-1950s onwards his demeanor became more respectable as he came to concentrate on traditional athletics. As *sarparast-e varzeš-e bāstāni* (head of ancient sport) he played a major part in keeping alive Iran's athletic tradition



at a time when the country's physical education establishment was mostly committed to propagating Western disciplines and looked down on Ja'fari and the *zur-kāna* tradition (Ja'fari; Saršār, pp. 304-5). His tireless efforts to recruit young Iranian men for what was by now called "ancient" (*bāstāni*) sports played a major part in ensuring the generational renewal of that tradition at a time when most young people were attracted to Western sports. The Ja'fari club was Iran's first modern *zur-kānā* and paved the way for others, such as that of the Bānk-e Melli and the ones built after the revolution. Since the revolution, the premises of his club have housed the National Federation of Ancient Sports.

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