



## JULFA III. THE 20TH CENTURY

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### JULFA

#### iii. The 20th Century

The [Constitutional Revolution](#) of 1905-11 had a profound impact on Persian society as a whole. Armenians were actively involved in the constitutional movement. Most Armenian revolutionaries were members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (A.R.F.; *Hay yelap'oxakan Dašnakc'ut'iwn*, abbreviated to *Dašnak*), which had been founded in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Russia, in 1890 to promote economic and political freedom for Ottoman Armenia. The most prominent member of the A.R.F. in the Persian constitutional movement was the military leader Ep'rem Davt'ean (d. 1913), better known as Yeprem Khan. Among the men serving under his command were Armenian volunteers from different provinces, including a few dozen men from New Julfa and the neighboring rural districts of P'eria and Čār Maḥāl in the province of Isfahan (Minasean, 1999, p. 29; Baibouritan, 2005, pp. 522-27).

The title of the first bylaws issued by the diocese of New Julfa in 1909 already signaled the new political spirit: *Kanonadrut'iwn Parska-Hndkastani t'emi Hayoc' Azgayin Sahmanadrut'ean* (Bylaws of the national constitution of the Armenians of the diocese of Persia and India). The church leaders established a liberal legal framework and organized the self-governance of the Armenian community, defined as part of the Persian state. Article 1 declared that the Armenian people of the constitutional state of Persia were free to perform their religious services and to govern their ecclesiastical and community



affairs according to the canon laws and rites of the Armenian church and within the framework of the Persian Constitution, while article 9 stipulated that the members of the diocese's governing institutions were elected to their offices. The diocese was divided into two regions, whose administrative centers were in New Julfa and Tehran, respectively. Its diocesan assembly (*t'emakan žołov*), whose 40 seats were filled with elected clergymen and lay delegates, oversaw the two provincial diocesan councils (*t'emakan xorhurd*). The primate presided over the diocesan assembly and the two regional councils, but his authority was largely limited to religious matters, and he had to answer to the diocesan assembly on all other issues. Articles 23-57 detailed the various responsibilities of the diocesan councils in their respective regions regarding the administrative, financial, educational, and legal matters of churches, schools, properties, and the community at large. Each regional council oversaw ten district boards (*gorcakalut'iwn*), whose elected members managed the church and community affairs of their respective districts in accordance with articles 58-64. The diocese's new administrative organization shifted responsibility to the local clergy and the regional councils. This step proved to be crucial in the following decades, because the local clergy and the regional councils effectively governed the diocese when the primate's seat remained vacant during 1912-20, 1924-26, 1930-45, and 1949-61 (Martirosyan, pp. 229-30; Minasean, 1996, pp. 108-20).

The second electoral law of 12 Jomādā II 1327/1 July 1909 stated that the National Assembly (*Majles-e šurā-ye melli*) comprised 120 representatives, including one delegate for each of the five tribal constituencies and the four religious minorities of Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrians, and Armenians (Arjomand, 1992b, p. 190). From November 1909 onwards, when the Majles was convened for its second term, the Armenian congregations of central and southern Iran, who belonged to the Armenian diocese of Persia and India, have been continuously represented. In 1924, the Armenian congregations of northern Iran, who belong to the Armenian diocese of Tabriz, received the right to elect their own delegate to the Majles, and today two Armenian delegates represent the interests of Armenian communities of Iran (Martirosyan, pp. 237-38; Minasean, 1999, p. 28).

New Julfa's population changed dramatically during the first half of the 20th century. More than half of its population left the city; most moved to Tehran, which had become the capital under the Qajars, while others went to India and the oil-producing region of Kuzestān (Khuzestan). The demographic loss



was offset by the gradual influx of Armenian villagers from the rural districts of P'eria, Čār Maḥāl, and Burvari, near present-day Golpāyegān. In 1930, New Julfa's Armenian community comprised 3,800 people in 840 families: 2,124 belonged to native New Julfa families, while 1,360 were considered peasants and 316 had emigrated from other areas. The group of 890 Armenian adult males comprised 12 priests, 9 doctors, 317 small businessmen, teachers, and other white-collar professionals, 331 craftsmen, 80 soldiers, 278 laborers, and 180 unemployed men (Minasean, 1999, p. 137). After World War II the mass repatriation of Armenians from around the world also affected New Julfa's population. Between 1946 and 1947 more than 300 families immigrated to Soviet Armenia, and they were replaced by a second wave of Armenian villagers from the rural districts of P'eria, Čār Maḥāl, and Burvari. In 1952, 4,675 Armenians lived in New Julfa (Martirosyan, pp. 284-86; Minasean, 1999, p. 136).

In 1931, the internationally acclaimed painter Sarkis Xač'aturean (1886-1947) moved to New Julfa. He established the first museum of All Savior's Monastery in the monastery's library building by moving the book collection to another building. He also taught art classes and trained for the next two years a group of young Armenian painters, including Ervand Nahapetean and Sumbat' Gurelean, who later gained prominence among Iranian artists.

The independent Armenian schools of New Julfa and their Armenian staff had successfully served the educational needs of its community since the middle of the 19th century (see ii, above). But in 1936 Reza Shah (r. 1925-41) decreed that a uniform curriculum in Persian should be taught throughout the country in order to actively promote the establishment of an Iranian national state (Ashraf, p. 170), and the Ministry of Education established qualification requirements for all school principals and teachers. The Armenian schools were placed the direct control of the government, and Armenian language instruction and the organization of Armenian cultural events were strictly prohibited. The new policy led to the dismissal of the Armenian teachers amid heavy protests by students, parents, and New Julfa's community leaders, and the community resorted to underground teaching, mostly in private homes. In 1943 Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941-79) permitted the teaching of Armenian, though only as the language of the Armenian church, for a maximum of 8-10 hours per week. The inclusion of Armenian language instruction into the official curriculum helped to preserve Armenian literacy among Armenians in Iran (Martirosyan, pp. 235-37; Baibourtian, 1999, pp. 292-94).



During the first half of the 20th century, the overall population of Tehran significantly increased, and its Armenian population grew accordingly. The Armenian community of Tehran became the most important Armenian congregation in Iran, and in 1944 they separated from the diocese of Iran and India to form—together with the smaller Armenian communities of Qazvin, Rašt, Anzali, Māzandarān, Khorasan, Hamadān, Arāk, and 5 neighboring rural districts—the third diocese of the Armenian church in Iran, after those of New Julfa and Tabriz. The Holy See of Ējmiacin in 1945 elevated the archbishops Vahan Kostanean and Rubēn Drambean to serve as the primates of New Julfa and Tehran, respectively. But both archbishops were expelled from Iran in 1949, and the following year the Pahlavi government banned foreign nationals from serving as the religious leaders of Iranian congregations (*Č'orēk'č'ēan*, p. 563). In 1958 the three Armenian dioceses of Iran entered under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Armenian Catholicate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, while the Armenian communities of India and Java maintained their loyalty to the Holy See of Ējmiacin. The jurisdiction of the diocese of Iran and India was now limited to New Julfa, P'eria, Čār Maḥāl, Shiraz, and the Armenian communities in Khuzestan.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah the Armenian community prospered again, and in the early 1970s, more than 6,000 Armenians lived in New Julfa. Since there was a considerable shortage in affordable housing, the diocese of New Julfa built more than one hundred new apartments offering accommodation to young couples at reasonable rents. Furthermore, the Iranian government gave more than 200 Armenian families incentives to move to Šāhin-Šahr, a newly built suburb 20 miles to the north of Isfahan, where they continued their life as an extension of the New Julfa community. A generation of well-educated young Armenians revitalized New Julfa. They worked in and around the city of Isfahan for Iranian and foreign companies, as well as for government institutions. All Savior's Monastery was the community's cultural center, and the Armenian Community Club and a number of educational, cultural, youth, and athletic organizations and associations provided venues for different communal activities (Minasean, 2008).

Between the late 1960s and 1979, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation of Lisbon, Portugal and other West European cultural institutions collaborated with the diocese of New Julfa to preserve the community's historical and cultural heritage. All Savior's Monastery built a new state-of-the-art museum



to house its art collection and renovated its library, so that its collection of 700 Armenian manuscripts and more than 15,000 printed volumes were again accessible to the public. The publishing house received a modern press, and the monastery's archives were catalogued. The publication of a few monumental works about New Julfa's architecture (Carswell; Karapetian; Hakhnazarian) and Armenian manuscripts (Tēr Avetisean; Der Nersessian and Mekhitarian) spawned a number of new studies on the history of New Julfa.

The Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 greatly affected the Armenian community of New Julfa. The A.R.F. had been for decades the only organized Armenian political party in Iran, and so the A.R.F.'s local chapter dominated the Armenian politics of New Julfa. But during the first months of the revolution many Armenians openly challenged the authority of their community leaders, mainly by targeting the A.R.F.'s New Julfa chapter. The opposition was led by a Temporary Committee of the People (*Žamanakavor Žołovrdakan Komitē*) which organized public protests against the community leadership. After a few months of clashes between the opposing factions, the crisis was resolved when an election was held to determine the community's new leaders (Minasian, 1999, pp. 67-68).

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88; see Gieling) hundreds of Armenian men from the New Julfa community were drafted for military service. The community had also to provide material support to the Iranian army. Thousands of Armenian refugees from the war zone of Khuzestan sought refuge in New Julfa and remained there for several years, thereby imposing an additional burden on the community.

In 1979 the Islamic Republic adopted a new constitution (*Qānun-e asāsi-e jomhuri-e eslāmi-e Irān*; see Arjomand, 1992a) which clearly defined the rights of the Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian minorities. For the first time in their almost 400-year history in Iran, the duties and rights of the Armenians in New Julfa were spelled out in a constitution. In chapter I, article 13, "Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education" (Eng. tr. of Islamic Constitution, 1979). Chapter II, article 15, states that minorities are allowed to maintain schools and media outlets in languages other than Persian, the official language of Iran: "the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian" (ibid.).



The number of Majles representatives for the religious minorities is fixed in chapter VI, section 1, article 64 (2), and 5 of the 270 Majles seats are set aside for Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians: “The Zoroastrians and Jews will each elect one representative; Assyrian and Chaldean Christians will jointly elect one representative; and Armenian Christians in the north and those in the south of the country will each elect one representative” (ibid.).

For the first two years after the Islamic Revolution, the constitution’s articles 13 and 15 were interpreted in such a way that nothing changed in the Armenian schools with regard to religious instruction and the teaching of the Armenian language. But in November 1981 the government prohibited the teaching of the Armenian language in schools and ordered that all religious instruction must be given in Persian. In November 1983, the Ministry of Education and Training (*Wezārat-e āmuzeš o parvareš*) stipulated for all religious minorities that religious instruction must be given in Persian using a Persian textbook issued by the ministry itself. The teaching of the minorities’ languages was limited to two hours per week (Sanasarian, pp. 78-80). Although Armenians throughout Iran vigorously protested against these changes, in 1984 the government closed more than a dozen Armenian schools in Tehran (Sanasarian, p. 80). But the Armenian schools of New Julfa remained open because of the support of the Friday prayer leader (*emām-e jom’a*) of Isfahan, Ayatollah Jalāl-al-Din Ṭāheri, who had been close to the Armenians since his childhood. New Julfa’s schools have only partly complied with the new rules and continue to teach the Armenian language and religion 8-10 hours per week.

In recent years, many Armenians have immigrated to the Republic of Armenia and to the U.S.A., and yet the community in New Julfa has remained vibrant. Its spiritual foundation is All Savior’s Monastery and 10 active parish churches. There are more than 1,000 students ranging from kindergarten to high school. The community maintains a cultural and athletic center for the youth, a medical center, a home for the elderly, as well as several social, charitable, and educational associations. In 2005 the Armenians celebrated the 400th anniversary of New Julfa with public events, demonstrating a renewed sense of hope and commitment.



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