

CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENTS AND PARTY ACTIVITY IN IRAN

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Abstract. *This article investigates the socio-political preconditions, structural dynamics, and historical consequences of the Constitutional Movement in Iran during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing upon an analysis of internal governance failures and external geopolitical pressures, the study demonstrates how the systemic crisis of the Qajar state – characterized by fiscal disorder, judicial dysfunction, centralized despotism, and the progressive erosion of economic sovereignty through foreign concessions – generated the conditions from which a broad-based constitutional movement emerged. The article further examines the multi-stage character of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, the role of merchants, clergy, and intellectuals as its principal social constituencies, and the foundational significance of the 1906 Constitution and the establishment of the Majlis. Special attention is devoted to the formation of Iran's first political parties and civic organizations, which laid the institutional groundwork for parliamentary culture and political pluralism. The study concludes that the Constitutional Movement, despite its incomplete realization, constitutes a defining episode in Iranian political modernization and a durable reference point for subsequent struggles over constitutionalism, sovereignty, and the rule of law.*

Keywords: *Iran, Qajar dynasty, Constitutional Movement, Constitutional Revolution, Majlis, constitutionalism, rule of law, political parties, civil society, Iranian modernization.*

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a period of acute and systemic crisis in the socio-political life of Iranian society. Under the Qajar dynasty, the political and economic trajectory of the country underwent a pronounced deceleration: state administration became increasingly decentralized, structurally incoherent, and operationally ineffective¹. The absolute nature of royal authority, coupled with a systematic disregard for the interests of diverse social constituencies in the process of political decision-making, engendered widespread and deepening discontent across Iranian society². Of particular gravity was the progressive expansion of foreign state control over the strategic sectors of the national economy,

¹ Abrahamian E. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. – p. 12.

² Katouzian H. *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. – p. 34.

which emerged as a direct and palpable threat to Iranian sovereignty³. Concessions, trade monopoly rights, and financial privileges extended to foreign capital were fundamentally incompatible with national economic interests, and contributed measurably to the deterioration of living conditions among the broader population.

Against this backdrop, the disintegration of the state fiscal system, the disproportionate concentration of the tax burden upon ordinary citizens, and the steady accumulation of sovereign debt served to intensify social tensions further. The pervasive injustice of the judicial system, the arbitrary conduct of officials and provincial administrators, and the persistent failure to uphold the rule of law generated an urgent and widely shared demand for substantive political reform throughout Iranian society. Consequently, organized movements oriented toward the fundamental restructuring of the existing political order began to crystallize within the Iranian public sphere.

It was within this precise historical conjuncture that the Constitutional Movement emerged as a decisive turning point in Iranian history – one aimed at the thoroughgoing reform of the political system⁴. The movement advanced a coherent set of programmatic demands: the curtailment of absolute monarchical power, the institutionalization of the rule of law, the establishment of a parliament (Majlis) as a representative legislative body, and the expansion of public participation in state governance. In this manner, the Constitutional Movement evolved into a broad political coalition that brought together the aspirations of diverse social groups, including merchants, intellectuals, artisans, and significant segments of the religious establishment.

The formation and subsequent development of the Iranian Constitutional Movement were determined by a complex interplay of internal and external forces, each of which exercised a decisive influence on its character and trajectory. Among the internal determinants, the most consequential were the progressive weakening of central governmental authority, the deepening of the fiscal crisis, the inequitable distribution of the tax burden, endemic corruption within the state apparatus, and the systemic inefficiency of the judicial system. These compounding structural failures deepened social inequality and accelerated the transformation of diffuse political discontent into organized mass mobilization.

The external dimension of the movement's formation was equally significant. The intensifying geopolitical competition between the Russian Empire and Great Britain for spheres of influence within Iran – together with the expanding

³Cronin S. *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions since 1800*. – London: Routledge, 2013. – p. 78.

⁴ Abrahamian E. *A History of Modern Iran*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. – p. 42.

penetration of foreign capital into the country's economic infrastructure – undermined national sovereignty in concrete and verifiable ways⁵. At the same time, the circulation of European Enlightenment thought and constitutional ideas, disseminated through Iranian intellectuals who had studied abroad or engaged with liberal political discourse through translated literature and émigré publications, introduced new ideological frameworks and galvanized aspirations for representative government.

The Iranian intelligentsia, drawing upon the constitutional experiments of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the broader wave of political transformation sweeping Asia and Europe, elaborated a coherent vision of constitutional governance adapted to Iranian conditions⁶. Progressive religious scholars likewise played an important role in legitimizing the constitutional cause: by situating support for constitutionalism within an Islamic legal framework, they made the movement accessible to devout segments of the population who might otherwise have regarded political reform with wariness or suspicion. External economic interference by foreign powers, most notably through concession agreements that subordinated key sectors of the Iranian economy to foreign interests, further consolidated cross-class opposition to the status quo. This convergence of grievances – material, juridical, and ideological – united broad social constituencies around the shared goals of constitutional reform and the construction of a state governed by law.

In this way, the Constitutional Movement acquired significance extending well beyond the institutional reform of the political system. It came to represent a broader awakening of national consciousness and a determined effort to reconstitute the relationship between state and society on new, legally grounded foundations.

The Constitutional Revolution that unfolded in Iran between 1905 and 1911 constituted a complex and multi-phased historical process. At its core, the revolution represented a wide-ranging effort to limit absolute monarchical rule, to subject political power to a legal and normative framework, and to embed juridical principles at the foundation of public life. In its initial phase, the revolution manifested through social protest, mass demonstrations, and the articulation of political demands. Merchants, artisans, intellectuals, and segments of the clergy joined forces in opposition to administrative injustice, the weight of fiscal exploitation, and the growing encroachment of foreign influence, collectively demanding systemic reform.

⁵ Cronin S. *Iranian-Russian Encounters*. – London: Routledge, 2013. – p. 81.

⁶ Martin V. *Islam and Modernism: The Iranian Revolution of 1906*. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. – p. 95.

The year 1906 marked the pivotal inflection point in the history of the constitutional movement. It was in this year that the establishment of the Majlis as a representative legislative body and the promulgation of the Constitution created the juridical foundation for fundamental transformation of the Iranian political system. The Constitution provided for limitations on royal prerogative, the delineation of parliamentary authority, and the formal recognition of certain political rights for citizens. This document represented the first systematic attempt to introduce the principles of the rule of law and governmental accountability into Iranian state practice. Its implementation, however, proved far from straightforward and gave rise to intensifying political contradictions.

In the subsequent phases of the revolution, a prolonged struggle emerged between those committed to consolidating the constitutional order and the forces arrayed against it⁷. Proponents of absolute monarchy, certain military circles, and actors serving the strategic interests of foreign powers sought to constrain and reverse the constitutional reforms. This resistance produced political instability, armed confrontations, and the escalation of internal conflicts. Nevertheless, constitutionalist forces continued to pursue an active course aimed at strengthening the role of parliament in state governance, securing the maintenance of legality, and advancing the reformist agenda.

In the course of the Constitutional Movement, Iran witnessed for the first time the emergence of political parties and public-political associations⁸. The Democrats, the Moderates (Moderates' Party), and other political groupings advanced agendas centered on social reform, the development of parliamentary institutions, and the expansion of civil liberties. Through their respective platforms, these parties sought to secure meaningful participation in state governance, to promote political accountability, and to ensure the supremacy of law. Their activities gave rise to a genuine plurality of political viewpoints and exerted a formative influence on the development of political consciousness and civic culture within Iranian society.

The clergy and the merchant-bourgeois strata constituted two of the leading social forces within the Constitutional Movement. Whereas the religious establishment sought to reconcile the constitutional order with the principles of Islamic law (sharia), the national bourgeoisie pursued the expansion of economic independence and broader political representation. This intersection of religious legitimacy and commercial interest provided the movement with an exceptionally

⁷ Abrahamian E. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. – p. 25.

⁸ Bayat M. *Iran's First Revolution*. – New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. – p. 95.

wide social base, enabling it to sustain pressure upon the existing political order from multiple directions simultaneously.

As a result, the Constitutional Revolution not only initiated significant institutional transformations within the Iranian political system, but also created enduring foundations for the subsequent development of party organization, parliamentary culture, and political participation. This process occupies a distinctive and irreplaceable place in Iran's political history as a formative experience whose influence extended far beyond the immediate period of the revolution itself.

The Constitutional Movement in Iran and the party-political activity that developed within its framework constituted a pivotal stage in the awakening of political consciousness and the consolidation of reformist thought in the country's history⁹. This process drew diverse segments of society into active engagement with political life, and served to disseminate the ideas of limiting governmental power, upholding the rule of law, and introducing the principle of representation into state governance. The parliamentary system, political parties, and civic associations that took shape as a result of the Constitutional Movement laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new political culture in Iranian society.

The movement also accelerated the development of civil society, enhanced political accountability, and fostered the growth of legal consciousness among the population. Although the constitutional order proved unable to achieve full stabilization in the face of persistent internal conflicts, political instability, and external interference, it left behind a substantial and enduring historical legacy. It was during this period that the necessity of political reform, and the imperative of regulating the relationship between state and society on a legal basis, first became a matter of broad public recognition and deliberate political aspiration.

Consequently, the Constitutional Movement and the experience of party-political activity associated with it served as a foundational historical reference for subsequent political processes – including the development of ideas of national statehood, the construction of modern political institutions, and the gradual formation of a contemporary political system in Iran. This historical experience retains substantial scholarly and practical relevance: it illuminates the principles of continuity and heritage in Iranian political development, and provides an indispensable analytical framework for the evaluation of contemporary political reform.

⁹ Abrahamian E. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. – p. 30.

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