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Nationalism in Iran



BY RICHARD W. COTTAM

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the two-sword concept of church and state is unknown. When such an overwhelming majority of the Iranian people adhere to one church, membership in another and often bitterly hostile church, makes identification with the majority difficult.

The Zoroastrians as a group did not figure prominently in the early nationalist movement, although a few individuals among them did. Many Zoroastrians were merchants and as such should have felt the same repugnance toward the old regime and attraction toward the new as were felt by the Moslem merchants. However, most of the Zoroastrians lived in Yazd and Kerman, cities in the south and southeast of Iran which were somewhat isolated from the national movement. A report by the British consul in Kerman in 1911 claimed that the Zoroastrian merchants in the area hoped for British intervention.²⁷ This claim is not as damning as might first appear, for the Yazd and Kerman area had suffered more extensively than had other Iranian sections from tribal raiding due to a relaxation of central control. The Zoroastrian merchants might well have been choosing between evils.

In 1907 a Zoroastrian merchant in Yazd was murdered by a Moslem. Few Zoroastrians expected to see the murderer punished, since Zoroastrians, as infidels, were often considered fair game. When the liberal Moslem leader in Tehran, Sayyed Mohammad Behbehani, sent a telegram urging local priests not to oppose punishing the murderer,²⁸ the Zoroastrian community was surprised and immensely pleased. This act was symbolic of the improvement in the Zoroastrian position that the advent of nationalism would bring. It was not just the liberalism of the early nationalists which resulted in this improvement. The Zoroastrian position improved even faster under the reign of Reza Shah, and no one has accused Reza Shah's nationalism of being diluted with liberalism. The really basic reason for the improvement lies in the inherent secularism of nationalism. As loyalty to the nation of Iran grew in intensity, the feeling of being distinct from Zoroastrians, who were in every respect Iranian, declined precipitately. In fact, a not insignificant group of ostensibly Moslem Iranian nationalists began to glorify the Zoroastrian religion as a genuine Iranian

²⁷ *State Papers 1912, Persia No. 4*, p. 131.

²⁸ *State Papers 1909, Persia No. 1*, p. 19.

religion and to deprecate Islam as a foreign, forcibly imposed religion.²⁹ There are indications that Reza Shah shared this sentiment.

In his article "The Problem of Nationalism and the Unity of Iran," Dr. Afshar states that the Armenians and Jews are forever excluded from the nation of Iran, but he accepts the Zoroastrians without reservation.³⁰ This view appears to be general in Iran, but the Zoroastrians have not yet been completely assimilated politically. Like the Jews and the Christians they have their own representatives in the Majlis, which underlines their distinctiveness, and by law no non-Moslem can be prime minister. The advent of nationalism in Iran has done much to integrate the Zoroastrians into the community and many of them have embraced Iranian nationalism, but Zoroastrians are far from being completely satisfied with their political position.

The Bahais

The extraordinary difficulty of dealing accurately with the followers of the Bahai religion is suggested by the various population estimates made regarding the Bahais in Iran. The son of a Bahai leader says 10,000 is a fair figure;³¹ Frye writes that there are 200,000;³² and an Armenian professor at the University of Tehran estimates that there are over 1,000,000.³³ But all agree that the Bahais are the most badly treated minority in Iran.

In no sense can the Bahais be regarded as constituting a separate nation. Although a number of Jews have been converted, the majority of Bahais are descendants of Moslem Iranians and hence have the same language, culture, and history as their Moslem brothers. The Bahai religion, which today calls for universal peace and brotherhood and claims to be "the sublime idea in which all creeds converge,"³⁴ evolved directly from the Shiite sect in the nineteenth century. The founder of Bahaim (although it was a very different sect in his day) was Sayyad Mohammad Ali, a native of Shiraz. He and most of his followers were originally

²⁹ Arnold T. Wilson, "The Outlook in Persia," *The Near East and India*, June 30, 1927, p. 781.

³⁰ Afshar, p. 561.

³¹ Mr. Fuad-Rohani, interview, Tehran, June 1952.

³² Thomas and Frye, p. 207.

³³ Professor Haknezarian, interview, Tehran, June 1952.

³⁴ Haas, p. 91.

Shiite, and this accounts for the present hatred of the Bahais. The Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians can be forgiven because their faiths preceded the coming of Mohammad, but the Bahai religion is a Moslem heresy and as such cannot be tolerated.

When reactionary religious leader Sheikh Fazlollah needed an epithet for the constitutionalists, he called them "infidels and Bahais."³⁵ The phrase indicates why Bahais prefer to remain incognito. Besides being regarded as heretics, they are accused of consistently serving foreign interests. The most frequent charge against them is that they are servants of the British, but they are often linked with the Russians as well. They are given no representation in the Majlis and can hold no public office. The Bahais are in constant danger of persecution, and as late as 1955 a vicious campaign was waged against them. The dome of their handsome temple in Tehran was replaced by a tin roof, and the building was converted into the headquarters of the military governor of Tehran. The Shah had used reactionary religious leaders in overturning Dr. Mossadeq, and now he was compelled to permit their attack on the helpless Bahais. Official sanction was given to the campaign when the Shah's own chief-of-staff swung the first pick against the Bahai temple dome. Iran received very bad international publicity as a result of this outrage. The Shah is now strong enough to resist the demands of the clergy and a recurrence of this attack is unlikely. It is significant that no such attack occurred during the emotionally nationalistic Mossadeq period.

To what extent Iranian Bahais adhere to nationalism is, of course, impossible to determine. T. Cuyler Young writes that the universalist principles of Bahatism run counter to the demands of national particularism.³⁶ However, members of the Iranian Bahai community insist that Bahais are the most devoted of Iranian nationalists. They claim that since an Iranian was chosen to be the Bahaollah, the manifestation of God on earth, the Bahais believe that the Iranian nation has a glory above all others. Probably there is truth in both opinions. It is unlikely that the Bahais, Iranian as they are in language, culture, and history, could be immune to the force of nationalism. But their intense persecution,

³⁵ *State Papers 1909, Persia No. 1, p. 47.*

³⁶ T. Cuyler Young, *Near Eastern Culture and Society* (Princeton, 1951), p. 136.

together with their universalist outlook, will drive them in the other direction.

Conclusion

A clear pattern emerges from this consideration of the impact of Iranian nationalism on the religious minorities of the country. Where the minority think of themselves as being part of another nation and grant that nation a primary loyalty (as with the Armenians and the Jews), their position in Iranian society deteriorates as Iranian nationalism becomes more pervasive. Conversely, when the religious minority are ethnically Iranian and identify themselves with Iran (as with the Zoroastrians), the growth of Iranian nationalism can help integrate the minority into the Iranian nation.

The Assyrians fall in between. Ethnically they are not Iranian, yet neither do they regard themselves as belonging to another nation. Indications are that Iranian nationalism will bring about the gradual assimilation of the Assyrians into the Iranian nation. However, much depends on two other factors if this prediction is to be fulfilled. First, if the Soviets choose to exploit the historic attraction of the Assyrians to the Russians (and they can do so only at the price of offending Iranian nationalists), they can reverse the trend toward assimilation of Assyrians into Iranian society. Second, if Iranian nationalism again drops its alliance with liberalism, there is a strong possibility that minorities such as the Assyrians will be attacked, just as German nationalism under the Nazis suddenly turned on the Jews, who were being rapidly assimilated into German society.

The Bahais should fall into the same category as the Zoroastrians. That they do not is due largely to the fact that Iranian nationalism is still under the influence of Shiite religious leaders. However, the failure of the strong religious element in the Mossadeq alliance to persuade the National Front to permit an attack on the Bahais is a significant and encouraging sign. As a secular movement, nationalism in Iran should, and apparently does, minimize the religious differential. The recent attack on the Bahais occurred when most of Iran's Nationalists had no voice in the determination of policy. The pervasive belief that the Bahais are

traitorous will require time to overcome, but after a few years under a liberal nationalist government this atavistic or totally mythical belief should fade away.

One institutional change that could help accelerate the integration of Zoroastrians and Assyrians would be to eliminate their separate representation in the Majlis and to permit them to vote for the district candidates. If deputies from Yazd, Kerman, and Tehran, for example, had to compete for the Zoroastrian vote and campaign contributions, they would be much more likely to pay attention to the wishes of the Zoroastrian community than they do now. Of course, such a reform would be meaningless at present, when elections are rigged by the Shah, but if free elections are held in the future this institutional change could be of great value.

act was given banner headlines in Iran. The occupation was clumsy and there were a few casualties, but the operation was brief and the price in terms of loss of life low. The act appears to have been popular.

Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf was at the hegemonic level. The Arab leaders in the Union of Arab Emirates were very friendly with Iran in spite of the seizure of the islands, and militarily Iran was overwhelmingly predominant. Iran exercised a solitary "Concert of Europe" role, guarding the region against any revolutionary change. With the construction of a naval base at Shah Bahar, Iran would become a major naval power in the Indian Ocean as well. In South Asia and the Arab world Iran was already a major influence both economically and politically. And as a major power in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Iran played an important world role. In fifteen years this was nothing less than a revolutionary change in power position. Yet there was no parallel growth in pride of the Iranian people.

Utilitarian Strategy: The Bedrock of Control

Following the overthrow of Dr. Mossadeq in 1953, the successor regime, first under General Zahedi and then under the Shah, had no choice but to turn to the Iranian landowning class as its primary base of societal support. The middle class had been much too enamored of Dr. Mossadeq, and despite efforts to please the most conservative religious leaders, such as the persecution of Bahais, by and large the most prominent religious leaders remained hostile to the regime. Some years would be required to purge unreliable elements from the security forces, and not until 1960 was the Shah willing to risk his survival on the premise that the security forces would maintain control even if there were a shift away from the upper-class base of support.

From the fall of 1960 until January 1963 the Shah made a major effort to liberalize his administration. He permitted some degree of electoral freedom and equal amounts of freedom for the press, speech, and assembly. But the consequences were not encouraging for the longevity of his regime, and at

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the end of that two-and-a-half-year period his political survival was in serious question. What he had more or less wittingly tested was the willingness of the most politically attentive, largely middle-class sector of the Iranian public to be reconciled to a post-Mossadeq regime in which the Shah's personal role was a significant one. The results suggested irreconcilability, and in January and July of 1963 the Shah survived the forcible suppression of the Mossadeqist opposition and then the religious opposition.

Following the advice of Prime Minister Ali Amini's protégé and minister of agriculture, Hassan Arsenjani, the Shah moved in the direction of mooring his regime in the peasantry and labor. Land reform and progressive labor legislation were the vehicles, and without question this strategy did produce a broad base of support for the Shah. But there was a serious flaw in this strategic reasoning. The peasantry and, to a lesser extent, labor were not easily mobilizable in support of the regime. Indeed, prior to land reform, the landowners' support for the Shah had brought with it the largely uncomprehending support of the Iranian peasantry. Now there was some positive enthusiasm from the peasantry, but probably the most important effect of land reform on stability was the removal of the peasantry from the ranks of potential opposition. Peasant riots against the regime could be dangerous, but peasant support offered little strength in case of a political crisis.

For positive support, the security forces were essential. Here the regime was clearly successful. Members of the security forces, many of them of lower- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, were able to improve their social status and that of their extended families. Furthermore, the material and other rewards granted the military were impressive. Not only were salaries large and housing and automobiles frequently available, but many of the military were given the heady experience of a training course in the United States. As time passed, gratitude for a rise in status was frequently offset by annoyance over a failure to be promoted or some such careerist grievance. But still the security forces by and large were attracted to the regime and gave it their support. Satisfaction on the basis of

diversity, competing ambitions, and the suspicion generated by years in underground competition. The artless quality of the government response, far from exploiting inevitable suspicions, served to unify.

The climactic event occurred in August 1978 when the Rex Theater in Abadan caught on fire, apparently the result of arson. Over four hundred persons were burned. The doors of the theater had been locked, presumably as a precaution against terrorist attacks, and were not opened quickly; the supposedly ultramodern fire-fighting equipment in the city arrived late and dealt ineffectually with the catastrophe. The government charges that those responsible were fanatical Moslems opposed to the Shah's modernization efforts were accepted without question only by the American press. In Iran the government's description of the Rex tragedy was accepted by very few. This was not surprising since the initial government account was incompatible with the physical location of the theater, and the early arrests were of young high-school teachers rather than of fanatical Moslems opposed to the showing of films. A revised and very different story gained little credibility. The victims' friends and relatives indicated who they thought responsible by rioting against the government. An account that gained wide acceptance was that several Islamic activists being pursued by SAVAK took refuge in the theater; when SAVAK reported this to the Shah, he personally ordered the burning of the theater. That this account would be accepted by so many, especially given the factual uncertainty of the case, is indicative of the extent of deterioration in the Shah's popular position.

Karim Sanjabi, leader of the National Front, compared the Rex to the Reichstag fire. But the results were opposite. Instead of being able to use the episode to consolidate power, the Shah moved dramatically to appease the opposition. He removed as premier Jamshid Amuzegar, a talented technocrat who had served the Shah well for many years as oil minister. Amuzegar's replacement was in many ways his opposite. Jafar Sherif-Emami, a senator and politician with a long survival record that testified to his ability to sense change in the political climate,

was given the task of reconciling the opposition. The Shah had turned to Sherif-Emami in the 1960-63 crisis with the same purpose in mind. Without question Sherif-Emami had the desired contacts. But he had no independent base of support and could not hope to attract men of any real independence into his government or into his confidence. He therefore was no threat to the Shah but neither was he of much use. In 1978 as in 1961 he could not establish serious negotiations with either the Islamic or secular opposition.

Sherif-Emami's two months as premier was the freest period in Iran since 1962. At times the press was almost free; debates in the Majlis came to life as deputies took advantage of the media exposure their position granted them and engaged in real criticism (a minority moved into apparently genuine opposition); old political parties were revived, including the National Front parties, and many new parties were born; and orderly, disciplined demonstrations took place, one of which on September 5, 1978, attracted as many as three million participants across the country. Strikes swept the country, and the government promised to offset inflation with salary increases which if fulfilled would consume much of the government's budget. At the same time, serious preparations were underway to place on trial for corruption several leading business and governmental officials. Heading the list was Amir Abbas Hoveida, the Shah's faithful premier for twelve years and his minister of court for one year. Not incidentally, part of Hoveida's family was Bahai and several of those under investigation, later to be tried, were Bahais. General Nematollah Nassiri, the Shah's loyal officer, participant in the overthrow of Mossadeq and for many years head of SAVAK, was also prominent on the list. Quite clearly the Shah was willing to take economic measures that could only appall his supporters among the newly rich in order to appeal to the opposition. Also he was willing to risk his support in the government by placing on trial men who had served him faithfully if not terribly well. He was even willing to offer as sacrifices to what he obviously saw as Islamic bigotry members of the Bahai community who had been among his stronger supporters. The act left the

religious opposition bemused, angry, and possibly a little embarrassed. Ayatollah Khomeini in a statement made explicit his promises that in the Islamic republic he advocated there would be religious tolerance.

Yet the Shah coupled his efforts to appease the opposition with harsh acts of repression. Most serious of these occurred on September 8, 1978, a few hours after martial law was declared. A large crowd was fired on and many people were killed. The government issued the figure of seventy-eight but opposition spokesmen in Iran claim they can prove that at least forty-five hundred were killed and reports of seventeen thousand deaths were being circulated. Only three days earlier, a million demonstrators in Tehran had given troops, police, and SAVAK officers flowers and had expressed feelings of brotherhood.

After two months, in November 1978, the Shah gave up his efforts to reach and accommodate the opposition. He appointed General Gholam Reza Azhari premier of a new military government. Schools and universities were closed, the press was suspended (and then refused to publish), gatherings of more than three people in Tehran were prohibited, efforts to break strikes of oil workers and government employees were made, opposition leaders were arrested, and parliament was recessed. The Shah promised that these measures would be temporary, but confrontations with the opposition were, as these lines were written, easy to forecast.

By far the most interesting development of 1977 and 1978 in Iran was the growth in popularity of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. When the riots of June 1963 occurred in Tehran the name of Khomeini had little currency among Iran's Nationalists. But the breadth of Khomeini's appeal among lower-middle-class and working-class Iranians quickly became apparent. The ease with which the Shah had suppressed the secular National Front stood in sharp contrast to the nearly fatal rioting by Khomeini's followers. In the years that followed, there was a close working relationship between the Freedom Front, led by Mehdi Bazergan, and Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters. As such the Khomeini movement was