Chapter 10 - notes by Denis Bašić

Constitutionalism

Persian Parliament / Majles
Persian Constitutional revolution of 1905

• How did it start?


• Two days later the protest of 2,000 angry merchants, tradesman, ulama, and theology student started taking a refuge (**bast**) in the Shah Abd al-Azim Shrine. The protest lasted for a month.

• Requests:
  1. dismissal of the governor of Tehran
  2. dismissal of Joseph Naus, the Belgian councilor to the Shah
  3. establishment of the “House of Justice”

• **The House of Justice** - *majlis* = parliament convened in October **1906** drafting a “Fundamental Law” = Constitution
Ottoman Constitutionalism

- first attempt in 1876

- Roused by the multiple failures of the Ottoman government, theological students rioted in Istanbul demanding:
  1. dismissal of the Grand Vizier,
  2. dismissal of the Chief Mufti

- According to the British ambassador to Istanbul:
  “The word ‘Constitution’ was in every mouth ... the texts from the Kuran were circulated proving to the faithful that the form properly sanctioned by it was properly democratic and that the absolute authority now wielded by the Sultan was an usurpation of the rights of the people and not sanctioned by the Holy Law ...”

- In 1878 Abdulhamid II suspended the Ottoman constitution using the outbreak of war with Russia as a pretext.

- Some 30 years later a new attempt after the rebellion of the Young Turks in Macedonia in 1908. In July 24, 1908 Constitution restored.
Inspired by both internal and external factors.

Internal factors:
1. Social and economic injustice in Persia
2. The crisis of legitimacy - with the Ottomans
3. An army mutiny in Egypt
4. Appearance of a new social class of intellectuals

External factors:
1. Intensified imperialist pressure
2. Interimperialist rivalry
3. Consolidation of territorial states
4. Foreign examples

Constitutionalist movements in Japan (1874), Russia (1905), Mexico (1910), and China (1911).
Great Depression and Popular Movements

• 1873 the collapse of the Viennese stock market
• 1873-1896 - Great Depression
• in Europe the price of wheat went down by 30%
• in the US 2/3 of all railroads went under
• in the Middle East the international trade and commodity prices bred discontent among merchants and farmers.
• Ottoman and Egyptian bankruptcy and foreign supervision.
• Constitution, many believed, could guarantee responsibility.
• The lavish spending of the leaders criticized.
Dolmabahçe Palace - the main administrative center of the Ottoman Empire from 1853 to 1922, apart from a twenty-year interval (1889-1909) in which the Yıldız Palace was used.
Yıldız palace is a collection of pavilions and villas in Istanbul built in the 19th and 20th centuries.
Eram Garden, built during the Qajar era is an example of Persian architecture and luxury of that time.
Second Economic Shock
Gold vs. Silver

- Just as they were climbing out of the Great Depression of 1873-1896, another economic shock hit the economies of China, Japan, India, and Persia.

- Unlike the economies of the West, which used the gold standard, these economies were silver-based.

- The cause for the devaluation of the silver money was due to
  1. silver flooded East, where it had a higher value, as more and more countries bound themselves to the gold standard;
  2. discovery of new deposits of silver, such as Comstock Load in Nevada, flooded the international market with the precious metal.

- according to many historian, this crisis in silver-based economy was very similar to the crisis of the 16th century.
• Cash-strapped, indebted farmers in the US, for instance, demanded that the US Mint coin silver so that they do not become “crucified on the cross of gold,” as William Jennings Bryan put it in 1896.

• In Persia, where coining silver was already the practice, prices skyrocketed 600% between 1850 and 1890. The persian government borrowed heavily as a result of this inflation, and soon had to take out additional loans to pay back previous ones.

• After the onset of the depression protectionist sentiments challenged the free market liberalism, and Europeans and North Americans south to establish overseas the empires from which they could exclude foreign competition.

• Both Middle Eastern empires felt the sting of the “new imperialism” in forms that ranged from debt commissions to increased competitions for concessions.

• dissatisfaction of intellectuals with the way of how monarchs handled the economic crises in their society led to the call for constitution.
The core group of the army officer that founded in the Ottoman Empire the Committee of Union and Progress [إتحاد و ترقى, İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti] and restored the Ottoman constitution in 1908 were graduates of the military medical school in Istanbul.

Many of the intellectuals who organized anjumanha - the building block of the Persian Constitutional revolution - had either been educated in the West or at the Dar al-Funun in Tehran.

The ideas for the constitution were driven from both Western and indigenous sources.

The Ottoman and Persian constitutions were modeled on the constitution of Belgium.
Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905

- The Ottoman modernists interpreted the success of Japan over Russia in this war as a proof that an Asiatic power can defeat a European one in the 20th century. The reason for the success, they believed, was that Japan had a constitution and Russia did not.

- Russo-Japanese war precipitated Russia’s own constitutional revolution and influenced the constitutionalists’ struggle in Persia and the Ottoman Empire.
Mass Political Organization in Persia

- As much as the idea of constitutionalism, the idea of mass political organization also migrated from Russia to Persia.
- By 1905 there were about 300,000 Persian workers in the Russian oil industry in Baku making 1/4 of all workers in the industry.
- Eventually about 80% of these workers returned to Persia and brought back with them the ideas of unionism and socialism.
- Some of these workers organized an affiliate of the Russian Socialist Democratic Workers Party called Hemmat promoting a combination of Islamic modernist and socialist ideas.
- Some of Hemmat’s ideas, like 8-hour workday, free public education, an expansion of women’s legal rights, and the ownership of land by those who tilled it, infused the program of constitutionalists in 1908.
Failure of Constitutionalism

- Constitutionalism failed in both, the Persian and Ottoman Empires.

- In the Ottoman Empire, constitutional rule was replaced by the rule of a triumvirate of military leaders who took over the rein of the government in 1913. They ruled the Empire until the end of WWI.

- In Persia, after Mohammad Ali Mirza Shah launched in 1908 a counterattack against the constitutionalists and closed the parliament in Tehran, the constitutionalists established a pro-constitutionalist commune in Tabriz while an army composed of social-democrats and Armenian and Muslim radicals marched from the northern city of Rashd to Tehran to restore the parliament. The Second Persian Constitutional Revolution began.
Mohammad Ali Mirza Shah (1872-1924)

...was against the constitution that was ratified during the reign of his father, Mozzafar-al-Din Shah. In 1907 Mohammad Ali dissolved Majles (Parliament/National assembly) and declared the Constitution abolished, because it was contrary to the Islamic law. In 1908 he bombarded the Majles with the military and political support of Russia and Britain. In 1909, after constitutionalists won in their Second Revolution of 1908-09, the parliament deposed him as a monarch and named his 13 year old son Ahmad Mirza as his successor. Mohammad Ali Mirza Shah is still remembered as a symbol of dictatorship.
A cartoon that shows Muhammad Ali Mirza Shah's treatment of the Constitutionalists and his Russian backing.
On October 7th, 1906 in a speech made in spite of his poor health, Mozaferedin Shah inaugurated the first session of the National Consultative Assembly. At this time the session was formed in the absence of representatives from provinces.

Following Mozafaredin Shah’s death, his successor, Mohammad Ali Mirza who then ruled Tabriz as a crown prince, ascended to the throne on January 21st, 1907. Before taking the reign, he pledged to respect the fundaments of Constitution and Nation’s Rights. But he contravened this from the very beginning which made Constitutionalists to react.

Capitalizing on the internal struggles, both Russia and Britain entered a pact to settle their own differences; effectively dividing Iran into two areas of influence for their respected countries. This made headlines in early September 1907 and united the various factions in Iran. The Iranian government was officially notified of this pact on September 7, 1907 by Russian and British Ambassadors.
The rising tides of dissatisfaction and discontent caused Mohammad Mirza to summon the cabinet members on December 17, 1907 under the false pretense of soliciting advice. He immediately orders their detention. Only Nasserul Molk, who was the prime minister, was let free.

On December 22, 1907 a new cabinet was formed headed by Nezamul Saltaneh Mafi. On the surface the air is cleared and the tensions are eased. But on February 1908, a bomb is thrown at Shah’s Coach, making him highly suspicious. On June 1st, 1908 Shah purges some of the courtiers. Ambassador Zapolski of Russia and Ambassador Marling of Britain warn the Iranian Government to submit to Shah’s intents.

Two days later, Shah invites the leaders of the constitutional movement to the Imperial Gardens outside Tehran. There he imprisons all save for one who manages to escape. On June 24, 1908, Shah places Majlis under siege and orders its bombardment by artillery fire.

During these times, the Tabriz uprising culminated and within the span of four months spread to Rasht, Qazvin, Esfahan, Lar, Shiraz, Hamadan, Mashhad, Astar-Abad, Bandar Abbas and Bushehr. The Freedom fighters prevailed against the tyranny at all points. The intimidation and interventions made by Russian and British embassies failed to stop the advance of freedom fighters. Inevitably, a number of Russian troops were dispatched to Gilan via Badkobeh, reaching Qazvin on July 12th, 1909. Russians warned Gilan Fighters to stop moving in against Tehran.
Ignoring the warning, Gilan freedom fighters advanced towards Tehran, and met up with Bakhtiari forces near Karaj (60km west of Tehran). Using the element of surprise, these forces moved through the lines of the government forces. Thus the 3000 strong, well-equipped forces entered the capital amid welcoming cheers of freedom loving sympathizers. Following bloody fights in the streets and the Bazaar District, once again the national forces triumphed and the Cossack brigade, having retreated to the parade grounds, was surrounded and forced into surrender.

On July 16, 1909, the capital was under complete control of freedom fighters. At 8:30, on the morning of July 17, 1909, Mohammad shah and a number of his supporters, under armed escort of Russian soldiers, took asylum with Russian Embassy in Zargandeh, Tehran.

On this very day, the National Consultative Assembly (Majles) held an emergency session and deposed Mohammad Ali Shah as a monarch, and named his 13 year old son, Ahmad Mirza as his successor. Azadulmolk was named as the Vice-Regent.

On September 10th, 1909, Mohammad Ali Shah left the Russian Embassy and went into exile in Russia.
Importance of Constitutionalist movements in the Middle East

1. to a greater or lesser extent, they brought about a change in the political culture of the Middle East. They made the state a site of political contestation.

2. they spread the representative principle - the idea that individuals had a right to participate in governance and in selecting those who stood for their interests.

3. They enforced among the inhabitants of Persia and the Ottoman Empire the notion that they were citizens not subjects.

And they made ideology - not dynasty - a foundation for political legitimacy.