Qajar dynasty

After ruling much of what is now Iran since 1501, the Safavid Empire was largely destroyed and occupied by invading Afghan tribes, who captured the imperial capital of Isfahan in 1722. Two years later, subsequent invasions by the Ottoman Empire and the Russians effectively ended centralized Safavid rule and ushered in a period of tribal conquest throughout the region. The Afshars under Nadir Khan conducted a series of brilliant military campaigns that drove the Ottomans and the Afghans out of Iran and led to the recapture of the cities of Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz and the capture of the city of Herat in western Afghanistan between 1726 and 1729. In 1736 Nadir deposed the last Safavid shah, Abbas III, and declared himself shah, ruling until his assassination in 1747 by members of his own court.

The Zand tribe, under its leader, Karim Zand Khan, replaced the Afshar tribal polity in 1750 and ruled much of Iran from their capital city of Shiraz. During Karim's lengthy reign, which lasted until his death in 1779, Iran enjoyed over a quarter century of relative peace and prosperity. However, a dynastic civil war severely weakened Zand power following Karim's death and led to the dynasty's overthrow by the Turcoman tribal leader Agha Muhammad Khan and the establishment of the Qajar dynasty with Tehran as its capital in 1786.

Under Karim, Agha Muhammad had been imprisoned in Shiraz by the Zand tribe, though many sources suggest that he was relatively well treated and even consulted by Karim on issues of governance. After Karim's death, he escaped from Shiraz and went to Mazandaran, where he fought other tribes for supremacy until 1786 when Qajar forces captured much of northern Iran. Over the next several years, Agha Muhammad solidified and expanded his territorial holdings, occupying the old Safavid capital of Isfahan in 1787 and leading campaigns to subjugate Azerbaijan in 1791.

In 1795 Qajar forces entered Georgia, which had once been a client state of the Safavids, after its ruler, Heraclius, refused to begin paying tribute to them, and sacked the city of Tiflis. The next year Agha Muhammad was crowned the ruler of much of Iran. He spent the remainder of his reign in the field with his army, campaigning to assert Qajar authority over the province of Khurasan and fending off attacks from the Russian Empire. While in Georgia, Agha Muhammad was murdered on June 17, 1797, by two slaves who had been sentenced to death for some minor infraction. Under him, the central government in Tehran was tenuous and the importance of tribal affiliations, both within the Qajar tribe and Iran's other tribal groups, remained an important aspect of political life. The bureaucracy that would coalesce later in the Qajar period was not yet formed, and Agha Muhammad relied on a rather decentralized government apparatus to rule his fledgling state.

Upon the death of the first Qajar monarch, Agha Muhammad's nephew, Fath Ali Shah, the governor of the province of Fars, assumed the throne. Under its new ruler, who had been trained in the art of politics while in his previous post, the Qajar dynasty began to shift from a tribal polity into a more centralized state. Fath Ali, unlike his uncle, was a great patron of scholarship and art, and it was under him that the administrative structures of government were refined. Iran's other tribes were kept in check because many of their leaders were required to reside in Tehran, and the Qajars frequently attempted to sow rumors among them in order to prevent alliances from forming that might endanger their control of the country. The Qajar administration was run by a new class of bureaucrats, the mirzas, and the support, or at least acquiescence, of Iran's Shi'i clergy, the ulema, was sought by the shah. The state benefited from periods of relative peace, though Fath Ali's military expeditions against both the Ottomans and the Russians in the Caucasus led to a series of wars.

During the Napoleonic Wars, which pitted various European powers against the French Empire under Napoleon I, the Qajars were treated as pawns. In 1801 they signed a treaty of cooperation with Great Britain, in which the British promised to supply the Qajars with military assistance against possible attacks on British India from French forces or Afghan tribes that might come through Iran. However, in 1804, having failed to receive any British aid in their war against Russia, since those two nations were now working jointly against the French, the Qajars aligned themselves with Napoleon.

In 1807 the Qajars and France signed the Treaty of Finkelstein, in which the French agreed to assist Iran in regaining Georgia if in turn the Qajars assisted the French against the British. The French sent officers to train the Qajar army and prepare for an invasion of India, but two years later, the French and Russians signed the Treaty of Tilsit, and Iran was again left without a reliable ally.
Finally, Fath Ali and Great Britain entered into another agreement, which included British promises to aid Iran during wartime, particularly during the continuing conflict with Russia. British military officers were sent to Iran in order to assist in the modernization of the Qajar army, which was overseen by the heir to the throne, Abbas Mirza.

To finance his war with Russia over the control of Georgia, Fath Ali increased the level of taxation and began the Qajar practice of appointing some government posts, including vacant provincial governorships, to the highest bidder. The state also granted tax-free landholdings to those who joined the army. Qajar princes were often named to important governorships, and many of them rivaled the shah in power and influence, which led to internal struggles within the dynasty. Despite earlier efforts to centralize the government, the Qajar polity still lacked a cohesive national army or bureaucracy.

The war with Russia ended in 1813 with the signing of the Treaty of Gulistan, which granted control over much of the disputed land to the Russians. When reports of Russian suppression of Muslims in the Caucasus reached Iran in 1825, the ulema pressured Fath Ali to declare war on Russia. The next year the shah acquiesced to their demands but was soon defeated because the British refused to aid the Iranians, despite the renewal of their treaty in 1814, since the Qajars had started the conflict. In 1828 Fath Ali signed the Treaty of Turkmanchay, ending the war and agreeing to cede additional territories to Russia and pay an indemnity for starting the war, which included trade concessions to the Russians.

Abbas Mirza, the crown prince, led an invasion of Afghanistan shortly after the end of the war with Russia, driving toward the city of Herat, but died in 1833 before the conquest could be completed. A year later Fath Ali also died, and the Qajar throne passed to Muhammad Mirza, who was challenged by two other Qajar tribal leaders, Husayn Ali Mirza and Ali Mirza Zill al-Sultan. With the aid of Russian and British troops, who escorted him from Tabriz to Tehran, Muhammad Mirza took power. The reliance on foreigners to prop up the ruling dynasty became steadily more apparent during his reign, which lasted until his death in 1848. The new shah ruled in name only after four years, due to ill health, and the Qajars came under Russian influence.

New Prophetic Revelations

On September 4, 1848, with the death of his father, Nasir al-Din Shah became the new Qajar monarch. During his reign, the government bureaucracy was built up and centralized further. The influence of the ulema over the government remained during Nasir al-Din's reign, and the government actively suppressed the nascent Baha'i, a religious movement founded in Shiraz in 1844 as an offshoot of Shi'ism under the leadership of a messianic preacher, Sayyid Ali Muhammad, who radically reinterpreted several Shi'i tenets. Sayyid Ali declared that he was the bab, an individual capable of delivering new prophetic revelations. After a joint conference of Sunni and Shi'i ulema met in Ottoman-held Baghdad and declared the new religion to be deviant and Sayyid Ali an apostate, the Baha'i leader was arrested and executed in 1850.

Under the leadership of Amir Kabir, who served as the shah's first prime minister from 1848 to 1851, the Qajar tax system was reformed and the growth of indigenous industries, including armaments factories, was encouraged. Iranians were sent to Russia and countries in western Europe to receive technological training and to observe the workings of foreign governments. Despite his positive impact on the state or perhaps because of it, Amir Kabir was deposed by the shah in 1851 and exiled to the city of Kashan, where he was murdered the next year.

In 1870 the shah named Mirza Husayn Khan as prime minister, and the new premier began a series of reforms, which included the further centralization of the state's power, the curbing of the authority of provincial governors, and the formation of a cabinet and a consultative assembly. In 1872 the prime minister granted a trade concession to Baron Julius de Reuter, a Briton, that granted him a 75 percent share of all Iran's mines, except those with precious minerals, and the exclusive right to oversee the construction of railroads in Iran. The next year, when the concession was made public, the shah was pressured by the ulema, who opposed many of its provisions, to remove the prime minister from office, which Nasir al-Din reluctantly did. Mirza Husayn, however, was not exiled but returned to the inner circle of the shah's advisers, where he remained until his dismissal in 1880. His reforms and attempt to modernize Iran by emulating western Europe were opposed by the ulema and many in the Qajar government who resented the attempt to limit their authority. Thus many of the reforms ended after his dismissal from office and subsequent retirement from politics.

The conflict between the state and the ulema came to a head again in 1890, after the shah granted a trade concession to a British company that allowed them to monopolize the tobacco trade in Iran. The clergy condemned the shah's decision and called for the public to oppose the concession. Protests and riots broke out across Iran, and in December of that year Grand Ayatollah Mirza
Hasan Shirazi, the world's senior Shi'i cleric, issued a juridical opinion (fatwa) that declared the use of tobacco illegal because of the trade concession; his ruling was obeyed by the majority of Iran's population, including the wives of the shah and Iran's non-Shi'i population. In early 1892, under intense public pressure, the shah rescinded the concession. Nasir al-Din was assassinated four years later while meeting with petitioners at the royal court.

Lavish Lifestyle

The monarchy's woes continued under the new shah Muzzafar ad-Din, who faced widespread opposition among the ulema, the merchant class, and the general public in late 1905 when he put in place new, restrictive economic laws and granted trade concessions to European powers in order to finance his family's lavish lifestyle. A constitutionalist movement, which opposed the concessions, led to the formation of a representative assembly, the Majlis, in 1906. The shah died the next year, and his successor, Muhammad Ali Shah, cancelled the agreement in June 1908 and ordered an attack on the Majlis building and implemented martial law.

Muhammad Ali used the army to put down popular revolts that erupted following the closing of the Majlis, and constitutionalist forces fled to Tabriz, where they withstood a siege by the shah's army for months. By the summer of 1909 a coalition of constitutionalist and other anti-Qajar forces captured Isfahan and marched on Tehran, forcing Muhammad Ali to abdicate on July 16. The deposed shah went into exile in Russia and two years later attempted to reclaim the throne by invading Iran, but was again defeated.

The outbreak of the World War I in 1914 and the violation of Iran's declared neutrality by both the Central Powers and the Triple Entente led to the country becoming a battleground as Ottoman and German invasions were matched by British counterattacks. The war was also marked by the signing of new agreements between Great Britain and the Qajars guaranteeing British influence over the country.

Reeling from the aftershocks of the war, Iran was beset with invasions by Russian Bolshevik forces in 1920, the continued presence of British troops, and sectarian revolts by the country's Kurdish and Azeri minority communities.

The inability of Shah Ahmad to address the country's mounting external and internal problems led to his being marginalized by Reza Khan, a commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, who formally put an end to the Qajar state and established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1926 after quelling revolts and successfully implementing a new authoritarian political order in Iran.

Further Information


