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# The Role of the Clergy in the Establishment and Consolidation of Pahlavi I (1925–1941)

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## Abstract

In Iran, the writing of history has consistently been intertwined with political decisions, and official historiography written after the Islamic Revolution is no exception. The majority of books and articles on Pahlavi I have inherited this historiographic tradition, and are thus highly politicized, particularly around the topic of the role of the clergy during this era. Official narratives of this period are based on two representations: portraying intellectuals and Britain as the sole forces involved in bringing Reza Shah to power and consolidating his rule, while concealing the role of the clergy, or depicting this social group as the sole opposition to his government. This article aims to assess this binary narrative and answer the following question: What role did the clergy play in establishing and consolidating Reza Shah's reign? Research findings indicate that neither of these claims are accurate, as the clergy played a key role in the transfer of power from the Qajar to Pahlavi dynasties by supporting Reza Khan during his ministry, participating in the coup on February 22, 1921 (3 Esfand 1299), and supporting him in the Constituent Assembly. Further, the majority of clergy not only did not play the role of opposition, but indeed actively participated in the governmental institutions of the era. This research utilizes a historical-documentary approach to examine the subject.

**Keywords:** Reza Shah; the clergy; historiography; Islamic Revolution

## Introduction

Reza Shah's rise to power marks a prominent and influential period in the history of Iran, as his ascension to the throne had significant impacts on Iran's political and social developments. "[N]o one felt secure... The major consequence of this era was the prevention of intellectual growth in a nation whose right to free thought was deprived."<sup>1</sup> Iran also made a leap from tradition to modernity during this period, which eventually led to political and social repercussions, including the Iranian Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Iran's foreign policy underwent a different shift at the regional and global levels, as the country established its permanent borders with its neighbors and pursued a policy of good neighborliness, striving to demonstrate a form of independent action in foreign affairs by engaging with major powers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Seyed Jalaluddin Madani, *Political History of Contemporary Iran* (Qom: Islamic Development Organization, 1990), 236.

<sup>2</sup> See John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992); Yervand Abrahamian, *Iran between two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran: A Developing Nation in World Affairs, 1500–1941* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1966).

But Reza Shah's economic and cultural reforms did not persuade Iranians to protest against great powers, and he was overthrown by the Allies in 1941. However, during the political protests of 2017, 76 years later, Iran's young generations remembered him positively, chanting slogans in his honor, shocking the authorities. These slogans brought the retrospective examination of Iran's history to the fore for Iranians, once again raising questions: Did Reza Shah serve Iran or betray it? Was he truly dependent on Britain, as claimed by the Islamic Republic? Did he attain power to serve their interests? What role did social forces play in his rise to power?

Regarding the transfer of power from the Qajar to Pahlavi dynasties, numerous books and articles have been written, which can be roughly divided into three categories. The first category includes works highlighting the corruption and inefficiency of the Qajar dynasty and Ahmad Shah's inability to govern due to his reduced powers as a result of the Constitutional Revolution.<sup>4</sup> The second category focuses on Reza Shah's merit, political opportunism, and how he utilized the coup of February 22, 1921.<sup>5</sup> The third category attempts to explain Britain's role in the transfer of power to Reza Shah. For example, scholars like Ghani and Cronin believe that Britain acted as an "inspiring force," was "no more than [an] encourager" for the coup, and had minimal involvement.<sup>6</sup>

As John Foran claims,

the available evidence suggests that while the Foreign Office in England had little or indeed nothing to do with the coup (it was in fact rather unclear about its policy toward Iran at this crucial juncture), leading British military and diplomatic personnel in Iran were instrumental in bringing it about.<sup>7</sup>

Nikki Keddie concurs,

While there is no written evidence of British Foreign Office involvement in the coup, the commander of British military forces in Iran, General Ironside, backed Reza Khan's rise to power in the Cossack Brigade and encouraged him to undertake a coup.<sup>8</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran's political leaders and affiliated historians have adopted the third approach, portraying the era of the first Pahlavi as a singularly British endeavor.<sup>9</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, described Reza Shah as Britain's puppet, saying "Britain brought him to power."<sup>10</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his successor, agreed: "Britain brought Reza Khan, promoted him, empowered him, strengthened his monarchy, facilitated his prerequisites, destroyed his obstacles, and paved the way for him."<sup>11</sup> Alongside Iranian leaders, official historians also insist on this perspective, asserting that intellectuals collaborated with the colonial state of Britain in planning, establishing, and consolidating Reza Shah's power.<sup>12</sup> As one such historian claimed:

<sup>4</sup> Jami, *The Past is the Beacon of the Future* (Tehran: Ghoghnoos, 2007), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Asghar Shamim, *Iran during the Qajar Dynasty* (Tehran: Modaber Publication, 1996), 593.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of the Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001); Stephanie Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Alireza Amini, *The History of Developments and Foreign Relations of Iran from Qajar to the fall of Reza Shah* (Tehran: Ayandeh, 2009), 266; Madani, *Political History of Contemporary Iran*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *Sahifeh Imam*, vol. 5 (Tehran: Institute for Organizing and Publishing Imam's Works, 1999), 404; *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Seyed Ali Khamenei, *Statements of the Supreme Leader in Tehran University*, Leader's Information webpage (1998), 3.

<sup>12</sup> By "official historians" and "official historiography" we mean those who have published through governmental publishers or received financial support. For example, see Hamid Rouhani, *Imam Khomeini Movement* (Tehran: Islamic Revolution Documents Center, 1996), 82; Ali Davani, *Iran's Clergy Movement*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Islamic Revolution Records

intellectuals who failed to uproot Islam and the clergy with their pens were tasked with bringing this mission to an end through the razor of Reza Khan. Therefore, fearlessly standing by Reza Khan, they glorified him, and they all stood together behind him.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside this recurring narrative, another narrative is also constructed suggesting that only the clergy opposed Shah Reza Pahlavi's seizure of power. For instance, as Ayatollah Khomeini, an early proponent of this argument, stated: "From the very beginning when Reza Shah's coup took place, the clergy were at the forefront and opposed it."<sup>14</sup> According to these leaders and their affiliated historians, the clergy sought to restrain Reza Khan, but certain domestic and foreign political currents contributed to the counter resurgence of despotism: "If intellectuals ... did not stand up against Modarres ... Reza Khan could not have broken away from the British stable."<sup>15</sup> As these claims have not been critically examined by any research, this study endeavors to examine them through reference to historical documents, thereby uncovering what role the clergy played in the establishment and consolidation of Reza Shah's power. However, answering this requires addressing several subsidiary questions, including: What was the relationship between the clergy and the court in the final years of the Qajar era? What was Reza Shah's relationship with the clergy during this period? Did this relationship play a role in their support for the coup on February 22, 1921, as a catalyst for Reza Shah's accession to power? In other words, did the clergy have a role in planning and executing the coup and, if so, what was that role? How did the clergy contribute to the consolidation of Reza Shah's power between the coup and the formation of the Constituent Assembly in 1925? What role did the clergy play in the overthrow of the Qajar monarchy and its transfer to the Pahlavi dynasty in the Constituent Assembly? And finally, how did the clergy contribute to the stabilization of the Pahlavi dynasty? To answer these, this study refers to historical documents from the years 1920 to 1941, primarily the minutes of the National Consultative Assembly and the memoirs of political activists from the reign of Reza Shah.

## Theoretical Framework

In the 1970s, Michel Foucault brought up the issue of knowledge and power in the field of social sciences, mainly in two books: *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In these, he described how new configurations of knowledge would lead to new formations of new modes of power and domination. Prior to this, the concept of power was primarily understood as "the ability to exercise one's will over others."<sup>16</sup> Foucault strongly criticized this definition, explaining that power should not be conceived of as something belonging to a special class, the state, or the ruler. Rather, power originates from a collection of impersonal factors, including institutions, norms, regulations, laws, and discourses. Distinguishing his view from the dominant understanding of power, Foucault stated:

By power, I do not mean "Power" as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another.<sup>17</sup>

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Center, 2015), 370; Mousa Najafi and Mousa Faghih Haqqani, *The History of Political Developments in Iran*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tehran: Institute of Contemporary History of Iran, 2005), 422.

<sup>13</sup> Rouhani, *Imam Khomeini Movement*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *Sahifeh Imam*. vol. 2 (Tehran: Institute for Organizing and Publishing Imam's Works, 1999), 393.

<sup>15</sup> Rouhani, *Imam Khomeini Movement*, 81–85.

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and T. Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 153.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 92.

Instead, Foucault argued that power is a diffuse and fluid force exercised through a wide range of social practices and interactions. Rather than examining sources of power, therefore, one should pay attention to its consequences. “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”<sup>18</sup> Tying the discussion of power with knowledge and focusing on the mechanisms through which knowledge is produced, Foucault wrote: “It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.”<sup>19</sup> In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he wrote:

We should admit, rather, that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.<sup>20</sup>

For Foucault, knowledge is the guardian of power and discipline: knowledge introduces what was considered irrational yesterday as a rational and accurate action now.

Foucault’s discussion is important here, because before Reza Shah came to power, the institution of education and knowledge was under the strict influence of the clergy; they were the ones determining the legitimacy of the government through the knowledge they produced. By issuing a *fatwa*, they were the ones who interpreted the king’s actions as legitimate and in accordance with the practices of Islam at, for instance, the start and end of a war or when concluding a contract with a foreign government. Thus, rulers always had to gain the clergy’s support to maintain legitimacy. In other words, in Iran, the clergy was the institution giving legitimacy to power, and the traditional and religious nature of Iranian society gave the clergy the ability to use their power against the king.

The success of any king depended on justifying the legitimacy of his rule for the masses in such a way that they consider him their sole protector and his rule as right and legal. The authority to proclaim such legitimacy rested with the clergy. During the period of Reza Shah’s ascension to power, the clergy paved and stabilized the way for the transfer of power from the Qajars to Pahlavi, first through their actions in the assembly of the National Council and then by accompanying and participating in the institutions of power. During Reza Shah’s rule, the clergy spoke and acted as if what the Shah was doing was completely in line with *Sharia* law and its preservation.

The clergy, who had lost part of their legitimizing power with the formation of modern schools, revived this role by attending these schools, regaining the position of judge, and using the two institutions of religion and knowledge in service of the government. Clerics who did not participate in power helped Reza Shah in another way: by producing and publishing *taqiyya* or quietism literature, they created a new political discourse that blocked resistance to his rule. Although Reza Shah was uneducated, he managed governing power-knowledge-legitimacy relations well, guaranteeing his government’s legitimacy through gaining the clergy’s initial consent. He convinced the clergy to present interpretations of Islam and *Sharia* that introduced him as the country’s sole source of security and power and the protector of Islam and *Sharia*, so that no one could accuse him of being the usurper of Imam Mahdi’s position.<sup>21</sup> This success helped Reza Shah suppress his opponents, especially communist extremists or democratic intellectuals, without any public protest.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selective Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 52.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Abdullah Amirtahmasb, *Imperial History of His Majesty Reza Shah Pahlavi* (Tehran: Majlis, 1926), 328.

After the Islamic Revolution, clerics exploited what Foucault later delineated as the relationship between knowledge and power, and by denying, concealing, and distorting Iran's history, presenting themselves as the sole opposition to Reza Shah.<sup>22</sup> This measure helped them document the struggles against him and his son in their name and legitimize the new Islamic government under the rule of the clergy class. As Behrooz Moazami's findings show, "historical conditions and adopted strategies of state making in Iran gave rise to the power and the institution of the *ulema* and consolidated Shiism as a part of the Iranian national identity."<sup>23</sup>

### The clergy and politics before the 1921 coup

The clergy's political actions between 1285 and 1299 (1906–1921) can be categorized into three groups, the first of which consisted of those supporting constitutionalism. Ayatollah Na'ini, Akhound Khorasani, Mirza Khalil Tehrani, and Sheikh Abdullah Mazandarani were among these, proclaiming that: "shooting at the nation and killing the proponents of the parliament is equivalent to obeying Yazid ibn Muawiya [a detested ruler and killer of the third Shia Imam]."<sup>24</sup> From this group, a few became members of the Second and Third Parliaments or joined guerrilla groups that fought against the government and colonialism in the midst of the First World War.<sup>25</sup> The Tangestani movement, supported by Ayatollah Abdul Hussein Lari, and the Jungle Movement led by Mirza Kuchak Khan are examples of the clergy's struggles against colonialism. The second group of clerics consisted of those who opposed constitutionalism. Sheikh Fazlullah Nouri and 326 jurists (Fa'iqh), that supported Muhammad Ali Shah's coup were among this group.<sup>26</sup> The third group was silent and cautious, the most prominent of whom was Ayatollah Seyed Kazem Tabatabai, preferring to not pay attention to political events.<sup>27</sup> They maintained their traditional position, rejecting the unification of the state apparatus and religion.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Constitutional Revolution was an event that changed the clergy's position: from a marginal role in politics to the core of political developments. From that point on, the clergy played an effective role in political developments, whether as supporters of the constitution or tyranny, gradually abandoning the idea of staying out of politics and instead strengthening their political influence by attending institutions of power.

This is the political atmosphere in which the relations between Reza Shah and the clergy emerged. Reza Shah maintained cordial relations with the clergy between the coup on February 22, 1921, and May 4, 1926. During these five years, he tried to present himself as a religious person.<sup>29</sup> It is unclear whether he did this by choice or if certain individuals influenced him to behave in such a way, but his behavior was in line with the laws of the coups, because coup plotters strived to "take advantage of the reputation and influence [of spiritual leaders]... to further solidify the coup."<sup>30</sup> Reza Khan, therefore,

<sup>22</sup> Behrooz Moazami challenges the assumption that the clergy have always played a crucial role in Iran's modern history. See *State, Religion, and Revolution, 1796 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Behrooz Moazami, "Rethinking the Role of Religion in Iran's History and Politics, 1796–1979," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East (CSSAAME)* 31, no. 1 (2011): 69–75.

<sup>24</sup> Mirza Mohammad Nazem al-Islam Kermani, *The history of the Awakening of Iranians*, gathered by Saeed Sirjani, (Tehran: Agah, 1978), 295–296.

<sup>25</sup> Kristen Blake, *The U.S. Soviet Confrontation in Iran, 1945–1962: A Case in the Annals of the Cold War* (U.S.: University Press of America, 2009), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Mehdi Malekzadeh, *History of Iran's Constitutional Revolution*, (Tehran: Sokhan, 2004), 829–880.

<sup>27</sup> Mohammad Turkman Dehnavi, *Messages, Declarations, letters and Newspapers of Sheikh Shaheed Fazlullah Nouri* (Tehran: Rasa, 1993), 256.

<sup>28</sup> Seyed Javad Imamjomezadeh, Amirmasoud Shahram Nia, & Majid Nejatpour, "The Shiite Clergy: a Comparative Study of their Role three Decades after the Constitutional Movement and after the Islamic Revolution," *Scientific Quarterly of Shia Studies* 10 (2011): 154.

<sup>29</sup> Abbas Milani, *A Look at the Shah* (Toronto: Persian Circle, 2013), 507.

<sup>30</sup> Seyed Ali Mousavi, *Coup and Counter-coup* (Tehran: Farhang, 1981), 160.

invited the clergy to his house... spoke highly of his services... and distributed money among his close associates... his wife held mourning ceremonies on the tenth night of Muharram in Tehran... Many clergymen visited him daily and sometimes received charity.<sup>31</sup>

Such actions led the clergy to become infatuated with Reza Khan, even though he, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, was “an unknown person. He was not a proprietor, a merchant, or a businessman!”<sup>32</sup> Still, he was able to gain the clergy’s support. Ayatollah Sayyed Yaghoob Ardakani, in a session on 9 Aban 1304 (October 31, 1925), while criticizing the Qajar dynasty, bolstered the legitimacy of Reza Khan by saying: “This family should come to an end... this withered tree must be cut down, and a strong tree should be planted in its place.”<sup>33</sup> With this optimism toward future political developments, 47 clergy in the National Consultative Assembly and 86 in the Constituent Assembly voted for the transfer of power from the Qajars to the Pahlavis.<sup>34</sup>

Seminarian social support played a significant role in Reza Khan’s rise to power. Indeed, to attract their interest, he abandoned his republican plan and visited famous clerics in Najaf and Qom. In return, Ayatollah Mousavi Esfahani, Naini, and Haeri issued a statement full of praise for him:

Since the establishment of a republic was not generally accepted and did not correspond to the needs of this country, when His Excellency [Reza Shah] graciously traveled to the holy city of Qom, and Mr. Prime Minister kindly accompanied him, we asked him to abandon the establishment of the republic and announce its cancellation to the nation, and he complied. We hope that, you will appreciate the value of this blessing and express your complete gratitude for this favor.<sup>35</sup>

The use of praising expressions such as “His Excellency,” “he complied,” and “you will appreciate the value of this blessing” portrayed Reza Shah as beloved and accepted by the clergy. Reza Shah’s meeting with religious scholars was an instrumentalization of religious and intellectual leaders to improve his image, to the extent that Ayatollah Isfahani and Ayatollah Na’ini considered “opponents of the *Sardar Sepah* as enemies of Islam!”<sup>36</sup>

### **The clergy’s role in the coup of February 22, 1921**

Planning is defined as a conscious act to achieve specific, explicit goals and prepare to carry out a series of related future actions.<sup>37</sup> Leadership is showing the path to others or moving in the appropriate direction.<sup>38</sup> Intellectual, clerical, and British assistance to Reza Khan’s power seizure was a “conscious act” achieved through a series of efforts between February 22, 1921, and May 4, 1926. One early such plan was the formation of the “Iron

<sup>31</sup> Mohammad Sajedi Soltani, Fayaz Zahed, and Seyed Mohammad Saghafinejad, “Rereading Clergy’s Stances on the Power Transition from the Qajars to the Pahlavi Dynasty,” *Journal of Iran History* 15 (2022): 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *Sahifeh Imam*, vol. 11 (Tehran: Institute for Organizing and Publishing Imam’s Works, 1999), 278.

<sup>33</sup> Islamic Parliament Library, Museum and Documents Center, *Annotated Compact Disc of the National Assembly Negotiation: 24 Courses of Annotated Texts of the Negotiations*, 3rd ed., vol. 5 (Tehran: Library, Museum and Document Center of the Islamic Council and Pars Azarakhsh Company, 2013), 211 session.

<sup>34</sup> Islamic Parliament Library, Museum and Documents Center, *Annotated Compact Disc of the National Assembly Negotiation: 24 Courses of Annotated Texts of the Negotiations*, 3rd ed., vol. 5 (Tehran: Library, Museum and Document Center of the Islamic Council and Pars Azarakhsh Company, 2013), 211 session; Abdullah Amirtahmasb, *Imperial History of His Majesty Reza Shah Pahlavi*, 591.

<sup>35</sup> Hamdallah Asefi and Gholamreza Watandust, *Sardar Sepah and the Collapse of the Qajar Dynasty* (Shiraz: Navid, 2013), 232.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Mohammad Reza Rezvani, *Rural Development Planning in Iran*, Edition Forth (Tehran: Ghoumes, 2011), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Hassan Anvari, *Farhang-e Rouz-e Sokhan* (Tehran: Sokhan, 2013), 1330.

or Zargande committee,” which was established by Colonel Haig to coordinate actors following Britain’s policy in Isfahan and then reorganized by Seyed Zia Al-Din Tabatabai in Tehran. The Zargande committee’s influential members included:

Kazem Khan Sayah, Manouchehr Khan Sepanlu, Masoud Khan Keyhan, Nusrat al-Doleh Firoz, Ipekiyan Armani, Abkar Armani, Major Esfandiar Khan, Adlul al-Mulk Dadgar, Sultan Mohammad Khan Ameri, Mirmuosa Khan, Mirza Karim Khan Rashti, Moezodullah Ghafar Khan Salar Mansour, Sultan Iskandar Khan and Mansour Al-Sultaneh.<sup>39</sup>

Years later, Seyed Zia Al-Din Tabatabai, known as Seyed Zia, stated:

five of us signed the Qur’an, and then, we staged a coup d’état. In order to ensure our safety that night, we swore to the Qur’an not to kill each other. Those five people included Reza Khan, Ahmadagha Khan, Masoud Khan (Keyhan), Kazem Khan (Sayah), and me.<sup>40</sup>

To prevent the resistance of Tehran’s armed forces, Seyed Zia claimed: “I had bribed them. I gave five hundred golden liras to Amirnezam, the Minister of War, and one or two other members of the cabinet so that they would not resist when the Cossacks entered Tehran.”<sup>41</sup>

After the coup, Seyed Zia became prime minister; a position he held until June 1921 during which time he imprisoned political figures who opposed the coup. On February 2, 1921, he was undoubtedly one of two internal coup agents, as he noted: “I have been constantly moving between Tehran and Qazvin since Thursday to reassure the Cossack forces, especially Reza Khan, that I have special permission from Tehran and that there are no threats to his rank and position.”<sup>42</sup> Seyed Zia is often portrayed as an intellectual associated with Britain, and his family background is deliberately kept secret. According to documents, however, “Seyed Zia, son of Seyed Aliagha Yazdi, was born in Shiraz in 1889.... [and] did his preliminary education under the guidance of private teachers in his father’s house.”<sup>43</sup> As they had a monopoly on public and private education in those years, clerics were his teachers; he spent his entire training under the supervision of the clergy.<sup>44</sup> As Seyed Zia stated: “when I was seven years old, I had two teachers: one for Persian and one for Arabic. When I was ten years old, my father hired a calligraphy teacher for me.”<sup>45</sup>

On his education in Shiraz, Seyed Zia remarked: “I had several teachers in Shiraz. One was Seyed Abutaleb in Moshir Mosque in Shiraz. There were a few others who were provisional teachers, but Seyed Abutaleb was my permanent teacher. I learned logic and jurisprudence from him.”<sup>46</sup> With this background, Seyed Zia should be considered someone knowledgeable about *Sharia* and Islam. Indeed, reviewing his daily activities in prison in 1946 supports this conclusion: “The result of this imprisonment was the interpretation of 60 *surahs* (chapters) from the Holy Qur’an, known as the *Roshanaie* (illuminating) interpretation.”<sup>47</sup> A person who interprets the Qur’an should be familiar with its meanings, expressions, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and such requires a profound religious education. So then, this begs the

<sup>39</sup> Mousa Najafi and Mousa Faghih Haqqani, *The History of Political Developments in Iran*, 4th ed. (Tehran: Institute of Contemporary History of Iran, 2005), 400.

<sup>40</sup> Sadruddin Elahi, *Seyed Zia, The First Man or the Second Man of the Coup* (Los Angeles: Ketab, 2011), 80.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Bagher Agheli, *Biographies of Contemporary Political and Military Men of Iran*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Gofar, 2001), 959.

<sup>44</sup> Mohammad Ali Mortajaei, *How to Form the New Education System in Iran, Opportunities and Challenges* (Tehran: Nashr-e-novin Poya, 2014), 32–33.

<sup>45</sup> Elahi, *Seyed Zia, The First Man or the Second Man of the Coup*, 163.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

question: Why does the Islamic Republic conceal Seyed Zia's family background? Why do clerics not discuss the religious education and the works of Seyed Zia?<sup>48</sup> Seemingly, the Islamic Republic prefers to introduce Seyed Zia as an intellectual who betrays his country and clerics as the savior of the nation, depicting intellectuals and Britain as the sole forces behind Reza Shah's rise to and consolidation of power while concealing the role of the clergy.

It was not only Seyed Zia who supported Reza Khan in becoming prime minister; clerical representatives—such as Seyed Mohammad Ali Jazayeri Shushtari—also played an important role. Mohammad Ali was the son of Seyed Hasan Shushtari, “a Tehrani cleric [who] lived in the Abbasabad area near Tehran's bazar, in which he was influential in those days.”<sup>49</sup> Seyed Mohammad Ali pursued his studies at Astarabad Seminary and was selected as a representative of Gorgan in the Fifth Parliament.<sup>50</sup> Modarres disapproved of Shushtari's position in the Fifth Parliament, but as he was related to the clergy class and “his father was a well-known and influential cleric, the clerics of Tehran visited Modarres to convince him to accept his [Shushtari's] credentials. Finally, Shushtari's credentials were approved by the end of the Fifth Parliament.”<sup>51</sup> By providing grounds for the dismissal of the constitutionalist prime minister, Moshir al-Doleh, in the Fifth Parliament, Shushtari was instrumental in Reza Khan's assuming the position of prime minister. Shushtari and his colleagues contributed to Tehran's famine and bread scarcity, in an effort to overthrow the Moshir al-Doleh government.<sup>52</sup> To challenge Moshir al-Doleh, Shushtari placed a stale piece of bread on his table in the parliament, turned to Motamen al-Mulk, and said: “Mr. Spokesman, I threw this piece of bread next to a dog, but the dog did not eat it.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, through his protest, Shushtari began the process of arranging Moshir al-Doleh's dismissal, with the support of other parliamentarians. Despite his opposition to Reza Shah, Modarres unintentionally provided the conditions for his rise to power by confirming Shushtari's credentials.

On February 14, 1923, Ayatollah Modarres further contributed to Reza Khan's power by endorsing his appointment as commander-in-chief in the parliament. Reza Khan was only a Cossack commander, but this resolution gave him considerable power to manipulate elections as the general commander of the armed forces. These developments occurred when Reza Khan's removal, through changing the king's opinion, was still a possibility. Parliamentary code stated clearly that the king could not dismiss the commander-in-chief without parliament's approval.<sup>54</sup> Ayatollah Modarres, as a cleric, participated in enacting this code, but Ayatollah Khomeini and official historians<sup>55</sup> later ignored this fact by stating: “The foundation of the Constituent Assembly, which was established through exerting the authority and influence of Reza Shah, was illegal.”<sup>56</sup> They do not disclose who created the conditions for Reza Khan to become commander-in-chief.

The clergy's role was not limited to this event. In the 211th session of the Fifth National Assembly, the temporary transition from the Qajars to Pahlavi was legalized. Before leaving the parliament, Ayatollah Modarres stated: “I have a legal warning. It is against the

<sup>48</sup> Seyed Zia was present at the Ulama's migration to Qom during the Constitutional Movement, like other seminary students, on July 16, 1906. Also, he published the *Islam* newspaper in Shiraz and, after it was banned, published the newspaper *Nedaye Islam* in 1907. He said: “Before the coup, my clothes were *aba* (cloak), turban and frock-coat.” Sadruddin Elahi, *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>49</sup> Gholam Hossein Mirza Saleh, *Political Memoirs*, ed. Seyed Mohammad Ali Shushtari, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Kavir, 2001), 2–3.

<sup>50</sup> Bagher Agheli, *Ibid.*, 884.

<sup>51</sup> Gholam Hossein Mirza Saleh, *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Mehdi Farrokh, *Political Memoirs of Farrokh (Moa'tasim al-Saltaneh): Fifty Years of Contemporary History*, (Tehran: Javidan, 1969), 226. See also, Hossein Makki, *Iran's twenty-year history; The third volume (the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty and the formation of the Pahlavi dictatorship)* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1979), 370–374.

<sup>53</sup> Gholam Hossein Mirza Saleh, *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Asefi and Watandust, *Sardar Sepah and the Collapse of the Qajar Dynasty*, 245.

<sup>55</sup> Mousa Najafi and Mousa Faghieh Haqqani, *Ibid.*, 437; Ali Davani, *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>56</sup> Mousavi Khomeini, *Sahifeh Imam*, vol. 5, 173–174.



constitution.”<sup>57</sup> Not only did he not attempt to persuade the representatives to oppose such a code, but he also helped Reza Khan’s supporters dismiss Motamen al-Mulk and Mostowfi al-Mamalik as speaker of the parliament. Modarres’s plan was, when the issue of transitioning from the Qajars to Pahlavi was raised, Mostowfi al-Mamalik would resign from his post and the parliament would be without a speaker. When Mostowfi al-Mamalik resigned, Seyed Mohammad Tadayon, a friend of Reza Khan, was appointed as the new speaker and the parliament approved the abolition of the Qajar dynasty.<sup>58</sup>

Ayatollah Modarres’s third function was realized in Reza Khan’s republicanism. According to Taheri et al., “in the crisis of Republicanism, as soon as Modarres defeated a strong opponent [Reza Khan], he did not try to use the opportunity to get the best result [dismissal of Reza Khan].”<sup>59</sup> Modarres, instead, returned to the Sepahsalar school to teach, paving the way for Reza Khan’s abuse of power through aiding his supporters and oppressing his opponents. Military commanders from all over Iran began disobeying, leading to insecurity. In turn, the parliament’s primary duty became preserving the nation’s independence and integrity, alongside figuring out how to end this crisis. Concerned parliamentarians sought a powerful leader to handle such affairs, and Reza Khan—who was not serious about republicanism from the start—saw these concerns and found an excuse to meet jurists (*mujtahids*) such as Ayatollah Seyed Aboulhasan Esfahani, Haeri, and Mirza Hossein Naini.<sup>60</sup> By exploiting their fame and convincing them to legitimate the coup, Reza Khan thus abandoned republicanism and issued a declaration:

When I paid my homage to the shrine of Fatima in Qom (Peace be upon her), I exchanged ideas with the clergy, and we concluded that it would be more beneficial for the country if all efforts should be concentrated on reform.<sup>61</sup>

The failure of republicanism and obtaining these three jurists’ consent was the prelude to dismantling the constitution and Reza Shah seizing power. However, these three jurists were not the only clerics with a role in Reza Khan’s popularization, as jurists from various cities sent telegrams praising his abandonment of republican government; an event censored in post-Islamic Revolution historiography. Clerics such as Sheikh Morteza Ashtiani, Mohammad Reza Zanjani, and Mohammad Ali Dezfouli were among these. Indeed, as Morteza Ashtiani wrote: “I am confident in the complete grace of the Almighty Lord and the attention of the twelfth Imam (Imam Mahdi) for preserving your excellency in order to protect the Islamic world.”<sup>62</sup> While Mohammad Reza Zanjani explained: “With the completion of God’s blessing and the victory of Islam and Muslims ... I am praying for the continuation of an unexpected godsend.”<sup>63</sup> By connecting the failure of republicanism to the Ghadir event, Zanjani also compared Reza Shah to Imam Ali. In a further telegram, Sheikh Mohammad Ali Dezfouli spoke of Reza Shah as Dariush, Ardeshir Babakan, and Imad al-Doulah Deilami.<sup>64</sup>

In the Fifth Parliament, the clerics’ role in granting the government to Reza Khan is undeniable. The Fifth Assembly of the National Council, approved on November 9, 1925, abolished the Qajar dynasty and handed the temporary government over to Reza Khan.<sup>65</sup> In this

<sup>57</sup> Abdulali Baghi, *Modrres, an Invincible Hero* (Qom: Tafakor, 1991), 87.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>59</sup> Seyed Sadruddin Taheri, Mehdi Shahid Kalhari, and Abulfazl Shakuri, *Modarres* (Tehran: Iranian Islamic Revolution History Foundation, 1987), 79–80.

<sup>60</sup> Mohammad H. Faghfoory, “The Ulama-State Relations in Iran: 1921–1941,” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 416.

<sup>61</sup> Mehdi Gholi Kah Hedayat, *Memories and Dangers* (Tehran: Zavar, 1965), 368. On Reza Khan’s abandonment of republicanism, see Mousavi, *Coup and Counter-coup*, 160.

<sup>62</sup> Abdullah Amirtahmasb, *Imperial History of His Majesty Reza Shah Pahlavi* (Tehran: Majlis, 1926), 328.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 303–304.

<sup>64</sup> Abdullah Amirtahmasb, *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>65</sup> Abdullah Mostofi, *My Life Narrative*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Hermes, 2007), 2432.

meeting, 104 representatives were present, 49 of whom were clerics. Out of the 49 clerics and their descendants (like Seyed Hasan Taghizadeh), 47 voted in favor of the bill. In the Constituent Assembly, 257 voted in favor and 3 abstained.<sup>66</sup> Seyed Mahmoud Hosseini was the only cleric to disagree.<sup>67</sup> On May 4, 1926, Ayatollah Seyed Javad Emami delivered the sermon during the coronation.

Praise is to Allah... who chose Reza Khan suitable for the kingdom of Iran. We urge the Almighty God to keep him for us so that all people can benefit from his kingdom. On behalf of all Iranians, especially the clergy, I offer my sincere congratulations.<sup>68</sup>

Based on such descriptions, Reza Shah's kingdom was considered God's will, not a British plan. The religious community and *ulama* sent congratulatory telegrams, further legitimizing Reza Shah's government. Ayatollah Mohammad Saleh Mazandarani's message is noteworthy among these. While criticizing the Qajar rulers, he thanked God for "giving the government to a just, strong, and trustee kingdom that protects the lives of men from calamities and keeps their thoughts away from mistakes, and repels the danger of foreign enemies."<sup>69</sup>

### The clergy's role in the consolidation and continuation of Reza Shah's reign

Contrary to the story told by official historians of the Islamic Republic, clerics were influential in stabilizing Reza Shah's reign.<sup>70</sup> They were absorbed into different parts of Iran's state bureaucracy, from the judicial system to the parliament and educational institutions.<sup>71</sup> Their most prominent role was in the judicial system (see [Table 1](#)), which was traditionally under their control. Thus, with the beginning of judicial reforms, clerics with a judicial background became judges, putting aside idealism and securing personal interests. Shahabuddin Kermani, a *mujtahid*, the highest academic rank among clerics, became the country's Supreme Court Advisor in 1934.<sup>72</sup> Nasrullah Taghavi, with the degree of *ijtihad* from Najaf, became the country's Attorney General in 1933 and Supreme Court head in 1936.<sup>73</sup> Mirza Mohammad Taher Tonekaboni became a member of the Supreme Court in 1927, was reappointed in 1933, and served until 1941.<sup>74</sup> After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the clergy criticized Reza Shah for his actions against Ayatollah Modarres, but during their tenure in the highest judicial positions, they had done nothing to end his or other political actors' exile (e.g., Ayatollah Seyed Hossein Qomi and 53 famous imprisoned intellectuals). [Table 1](#) shows some of the most important judicial positions clerics held during Reza Shah's reign.

The clergy also had a prominent role in executive affairs. Mehdi Gholi Hedayat's cabinet, which extended the 1933 oil contract, included clerics and their relatives such as: Mohammad Ali Farzin, son of Ayatollah Mirza Masih Astarabadi; Minister of Finance Seyed Hassan Taghizadeh, son of Seyed Taqi Urduabadi, the Imam of Haj Safarali Mosque in Tabriz; Minister of Education Seyed Mohammad Tadayon, a religious scholar; and Abdulah Yasaie, son of Haj Mirzamulla Muhammad Ali Yasaie, the Minister of Trade. The clerical community—and their relatives—were employed in many administrative departments (See [Table 2](#)). For example, Seyed Mohsen Sadr al-Asharaf, Reza Shah's Minister of

<sup>66</sup> *Islamic Parliament Library, Museum and Documents Center*, Ibid., 211 Session. Abdullah Amirtahmasb, Ibid., 591.

<sup>67</sup> Seyed Nematollah Hosseini, *Scholars in Action* (Qom: Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom, 2006), 30.

<sup>68</sup> Abdullah Amirtahmasb, Ibid, 705.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 632.

<sup>70</sup> Rouhani, *Imam Khomeini Movement*, Ibid.; A Group of Authors, *Islamic Revolution of Iran*, 4th ed. (Qom: Ma'arif, 2005), 74; Mousa Najafi and Mousa Faghhi Haqqani, Ibid., 422.

<sup>71</sup> Mohammad H. Faghfoory, "The impact of modernization on the Ulama in Iran, 1925–1941," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3–4 (1993): 277.

<sup>72</sup> Bagher Agheli, Ibid., 307.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 510–511.

**Table 1.** Clerics in the judiciary

Name	Seminary education	Position
Mohammad Ali Bamdad	Mujtahid from Mashhad	Supreme Court Member
Shahab Kermani	Mujtahid from Najaf	Supreme Court Counsel
Seyed Ali Behbahani	Mujtahid from Najaf	Attorney General Deputy
Haj Seyed Nasrullah Taghavi	Mujtahid from Najaf	President of the Supreme Court in 1936, Attorney General in 1933
Abdul Ali Lotfi	Mujtahid from Najaf	Criminal Courts Head
Sheikh Asadullah Mamaghani	Mujtahid from Najaf	Appeal Court and Supreme Court Head until 1930
Ali Heiat Tabrizi	Mujtahid from Najaf	Tehran Appeals Prosecutor, Azerbaijan Justice Department
Emad Torbati	Mujtahid from Mashhad	Astan-E-Ghounds Razavi's Lawyer
Mohammad Taher Tonekabani	Mujtahid from Tehran	Head of the First Instance and Appeals Courts, dismissed, Member of Supreme Cessation Court (1933–1941)
Mirza Shafi Jahanshahi	Mujtahid from Isfahan	Head of Tehran First Instance Courts in 1927, Assistant Prosecutor of the Supreme Cessation Court, Deputy Prosecutor General of the country in 1933, Head of the second branch of the Supreme Court
Seyed Abdulrahim Khalkhali	Mujtahid from Rasht	Counselor of the Supreme Court of Government Employees
Ziauddin Nouri	Mujtahid from Najaf	General Directorate of Khorasan Appeals, General Directorate of the Courts of the State Criminal Courts, Counselor of Supreme Cessation Court.
Mohammad Hossein Yazdi	Mujtahid from Karbala and Najaf	<i>Sharia</i> Ruler from 1927 to 1932
Mohammad Taghi Abdouh	Mujtahid from Tehran	Supreme Court Counselor, First Counselor of the Judges Disciplinary Court in 1928, Head of the Judges Disciplinary Court from 1930 to 1955
Seyed Mohammad Fatemi	Mujtahid from Tehran	Deputy Prosecutor General in 1927, President of the Supreme Court until 1945
Seyed Hasan Mishkan Tabasi	Mujtahid from Isfahan	Judge with seventh judicial rank, Appellate consultant, consultant of the Judges' Disciplinary Court
Seyed Ali Akbar Mousavi	Mujtahid from Yazd	Head of Qazvin and Kerman judiciary, Tehran's appeal branches Head in 1937
Mohammad Reza Vojdani	Mujtahid from Yazd	Head of Primary Courts in 1927, Attorney General of the Court of Appeals of Tehran, Head of the criminal branch of the Supreme Court and Supreme Cessation Court until 1936, Attorney General of the country from 1936 to 1941
Morteza Vishkaei	Mujtahid from Rasht	Temporary Public Prosecutor of Rasht 1927, Head of Rasht Court of First Instance 1932–1935, Head of the Court of Appeals of Tehran 1937–1940
Ismail Yekani	Mujtahid from Tabriz	Counselor of the Criminal Court of Government Employees

(Data gathered by author, 2023)

**Table 2:** Clergy and their roles in the administrative system (1925–1941)

Minister name	School of Education	Father's Occupation	Prime Minister	Ministry
Mohammad Ali Foroughi	Tehran Seminary	Poet and Scientist	Mohammad Ali Foroughi Hassan Mostofi Hedayat's second cabinet	Prime Minister War Ministry Foreign Affairs Ministry Economy Ministry
Mehdi Moshir Fatemi	Bagherieh School of Isfahan	Accountant	Mohammad Ali Foroughi Hassan Mostofi	Education and Endowments Ministry Interior Ministry
Seyed Mohammad Tadayon	Mashhad Seminary	Cleric	Hassan Mostofi Hedayat's first cabinet	Education Ministry Sciences and Knowledge
Hossein Samiei	Kermanshah Seminary	Official staff	Hedayat's first cabinet Hedayat's second cabinet Hedayat's third cabinet	Interior Ministry Economy Ministry
Hossein Shokuh	Tehran Seminary	Governor of Khorasan	Hedayat's first cabinet	Post and Telegraph
Mohammad Ali Farzin	New schools	cleric and mujtahid	Hedayat's second cabinet	Foreign Affairs Ministry Finance Ministry Economy Ministry
Hassan Taghizadeh	Old and new schools	Imam of the mosque	Hedayat's second cabinet Hedayat's third cabinet	Roads and Urban Development Economy Ministry Finance Ministry
Mohsen Sadr	Tehran Seminary	Cleric	Foroughi's second cabinet Mahmoud Jam's Cabinet	Justice Ministry
Mohammad Sajadi	Old and new Schools	Mujtahid	Mahmoud Jam's Cabinet Mattindaftari's cabinet and Ali Mansour's cabinet	Vice President of Roads Ministry Roads Ministry
Mohammad Sarvari	Tehran Seminary, Tehran Political School	Cleric	Mattindaftari's cabinet	Justice Ministry

(Data gathered by author, 2023)

Justice and son of Mollabashi in the court of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, “recruited fifty clergy from his hometown of Mahallat and appointed them to preside over different branches of the bureau of registration.”<sup>75</sup> During this period, rank-and-file clergy did not respond to any of the following events: Modarres’s exile, The D’Arcy oil concession extension, the law of unification of dress, hijab unveiling, Ayatollah Nurollah Esfahani’s suspicious death, and press censorship.

The clergy further consolidated Reza Shah’s reign through their parliamentary membership, which interested them for two reasons: to prevent intellectuals and secular elites from approving anti-Islam laws and to use the parliament to exact political influence among the masses and in court. For this reason, interested and capable clerics became members of parliament, while others nominated their sons. Table 3 shows the names of some of the most important clerical representatives in the parliament.

Despite the presence of the clergy in the parliament, there was no opposition to Reza Shah’s cultural, judicial, and foreign policy after Ayatollah Modarres’s exile to Khaf in 1928. The clerical community either remained silent or cooperated with the government. For example, Ali Dashti, a clerical member of the Eighth National Council, stated on the revisal of the Darcy concession: “When I got permission, my intention was to thank the government delegation and admire the administration for this patriotic action they have done. The government was the embodiment of the nation’s will and society’s thoughts in this action.”<sup>76</sup> The other 32 clergy members of parliament took no stance against the oil contract of 1933. The Goharshad mosque uprising occurred one month after the establishment of the Tenth Majlis, and none of the 24 clerical members of parliament intervened. Ali Dashti’s response to the hijab unveiling decree as a cleric was also surprising: “The decision of 17 Deymah [8 January] is a masterpiece of reforms and the first step (*Bait al-Qassida*) of numerous actions that are necessary to reform the affairs of the country and the nation of Iran.”<sup>77</sup>

Mullahs and their supporters also backed Reza Shah’s policies. Seyed Ebrahim Zia Shirazi, a graduate of Shiraz seminary, wrote in *Iran-e- Azad* newspaper: “We should change, we should be up to date, we should throw away everything we have, we should leave the bad habits and morals. The only way to save Iran is a change in our customs, habits, and morals.”<sup>78</sup> Sheikh Abdulhossein Firouzkouhi, known as Sheikh Aurang, was a prominent cleric who defended Reza Shah’s cultural policies. A student of Mohammad Kajouri, Mirza Abdul Ghafoor Hamedani, and Mehdi Eshtehardi in jurisprudence and principles, Sheikh Aurang played a central role in the Anjomane Parvaresh-e-Afkar (Association for the Development of Thoughts) in 1938.<sup>79</sup>

In this association, the orators discussed “modern education, patriotism, and loyalty to the king. They were explaining the country’s visible progress and justifying Reza Shah’s reforms and cultural-social policies. One of the most important efforts of the association was promoting archaism and Aryanism.”<sup>80</sup> Not only did the clergy not protest Reza Shah’s cultural policies, but they did not even try to dissuade their sons from following such policies. Indeed, some prominent figures of the Tajadod (Revival) Party—the party most supportive of Reza Shah’s policies—were sons of clerics. These sons, however, were radically different from their clerical fathers, who never accepted the reality that some of Reza Shah’s reforms were necessary and desired. Instead, after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, clerics attempted to conceal their family membership in the Tajadod Party. Seyed Mohammad Tadayan, Malik Al-Shoara Bahar, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, Ali Akbar

<sup>75</sup> Faghfoory, “The impact of modernization on the Ulama in Iran, 1925–1941,” 308.

<sup>76</sup> Detailed Negotiation Documents D8, Vol. 117: 1 November 1932.

<sup>77</sup> Ali Dashti, *Twenty-Three Years*, ed. Bahram Chubineh (Beirut, N.d.), 14.

<sup>78</sup> Mehdi Rahbari, *Government and Society in Pahlavi Era* (Babolsar: Mazandaran University Publication, 2009), 76.

<sup>79</sup> Naser Najmi, *Actors of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah Era* (Tehran: Einstein Publication, 1994), 98–99.

<sup>80</sup> Ali Akbar Mesgar, “Institutions that Create Identity in the First Pahlavi Period: The Example of the Organization of Fostering Thoughts,” *Payam Baharestan* 3 (2009): 536.

**Table 3:** Clerical members of the National Assembly

Name	Education	Constituency	Parliament period
Mohammad Ali Bamdad	Mujtahad from Khorasan	Shiraz	6
Seyed Ahmad Behbahani	Mujtahid from Tehran and Najaf	Tehran	5 to 14
Ahmed Akhgar	Sepehsalar School in Tehran	Bushehr	5
Mohammad Reza Tajadod	Jurisprudence and Principles ( <i>fiqh</i> and <i>usul</i> ) from Najaf	Sari	4 to 5
Abdulbaghi Jamshidi	Educated from old school	Babol	5 to 10
Mirza Rabi Jahanshahi	Religious studies	Tabriz	7 to 12
Mirza Ali Haghnevis	Ijtihad from Qom	Qom	6
Seyed Aboulhasan Haerizadeh	Seminary education	Yazd	6
Abdul Ali Diba	Karbala and Najaf Seminary	Tabriz	6 and 12
Mohammad Taghi Zulghadr	Shiraz Seminary	Fasa and Neishabur	5 to 12
Abul Hasan Razavi	Mujtahid from Najaf	Shiraz	10 to 12
Hossein Rahbari	Zanjan Seminary	Zanjan	6 to 12
Reza Rafi	Jurisprudence	Rasht	5 and 6
Zain al-Abedin Rahnama	Karbala and Najaf Seminary	Rey	5, 8 and 9
Hossein Dadgar	Tehran Seminary	Babol and Tehran	5 to 10
Mahmoud Dabestani	Kerman seminary	Kerman	7 to 12
Ali Dashti	Karbala and Najaf Seminary	Bushehr	6 to 9
Seyed Abdul Ali Diba	Mujtahid from Najaf	Tabriz	4 to 10
Sheikh Reza Rafie	Rasht Seminary	Rasht	5 and 6
At'ta Allah Ruhi	Kerman Seminary	Kerman	5 to 12
Mahmoud Reza Tolou	Rasht Seminary	Rasht	6 to 7
Kazem Sarkeshikzadeh (Syed Kazem Etihad)	Rasht Seminary	Rasht	5
Emaduddin Sezavar	Lecturer of Jurisprudence and Principles from Qom	Arak	11 and 12
Sultan Ali Soltani	Ahvaz and Tehran Seminary	Behbahan	9 to 12
Ahmad Shariatzadeh	Tehran Seminary	Babol, Mahallat, Khomein	5 to 7 8 to 9 14 to 15
Mirza Abul Hasan Sadr	Mujtahid of Tabriz	Tabriz	6 to 12
Seyed Mohammad Tabatabaei	Mujtahid from Mashhad	Saveh	11
Seyed Ismail Iraghi	Mujtahid from Najaf	Arak	6 to 11
Syed Reza Firouzabadi	Tehran Seminary	Rey	6 and 7
Hasan Kafeai	Mujtahid from Najaf	Mashhad and Dargaz	6 to 10

(Continued)

**Table 3:** (Continued.)

Name	Education	Constituency	Parliament period
Zia Al-Din Kyanuri	Mujtahid from Najaf	Tehran	7
Seyed Habibullah Larijani	Tehran Seminary	Tehran	7 to 12
Habibullah Majd Ziyaie	Mujtahid from Zanjan Seminary	Zanjan	7 to 12
Seyed Ismail Sheykholeslam Malayeri	At the level of Ijtihad from Qom and Tehran	Malayer, Toyserkan, Bijar and gross	4 to 6 10- to 14
Mirza Mohammad Ali Molavi	Tabriz Seminary	Sarab and Mianeh	6 to 12
Abdul Wahab Moid Ahmadi	Mujtahid from Kerman seminary	Kerman and Shahrekord	7 to 12
Ahmad Mehazab	Lecturer of Jurisprudence and Principles in Shiraz	Shiraz	6 to 12
Habibullah Nobakht	Najaf Seminary	Fasa and Behbahan	6 to 7 9 to 13
Mirza Mohsen Fazel-Almulk (Hamraz)	Conventional Religious education	Talesh and Gorgan	7 to 12
Abdullah Yasai	Yazd Seminary	Yazd	6 and 7

(Data gathered by author, 2023)

Siyasi, Mostafa Adl, Ahmad Kasravi, and Seyed Hasan Taghizadeh repeatedly emphasized the following ideas in *Tajadod* newspaper and their meetings:

separation of religion from politics, creation of a well-disciplined army and a well-administered bureaucracy, an end to economic capitulations, industrialization, replacement of foreign capital by native capital, transformation of nomads into farmers, a progressive income tax, expansion of educational facilities for all, including women, careers open to talent, and replacement of minority languages throughout Iran by Persian.<sup>81</sup>

After the Islamic Revolution, all such policies were included in the list of criticisms against Reza Shah, regardless of who played a role in advancing them.

To explore the clergy's position in the legislature, it is useful to look at the number of clerical representatives in the National Assembly in different periods (see Table 4 above). In the fourth and fifth terms that led to the establishment of the Pahlavi government, there were 81 clerical members of parliament. During this period, four prime ministers introduced cabinets to the parliament. At that time, Reza Khan was the Minister of War. Thus, in two parliaments, 81 clerics voted eight times for a person most disliked by the clergy after the Islamic Revolution. Indeed, during the Pahlavi government's stabilization period, the number of clerics in the parliament was always high as compared to other classes. From the Sixth Parliament to the Twelfth Parliament (June 23, 1926, to October, 1941), a total of 311 clerics participated and took no action to curb Reza Shah's autocracy, instead helping to stabilize his dictatorship through their silence and complicity. During Reza Shah's reign, in general, many clerics and their sons were influential members of society. The most prominent event of this period was the Eighth

<sup>81</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between two Revolutions*, 123.

**Table 4.** Clerics and their sons who were members of parliament

Parliament period	Clerics	Clerics' related figures	Non-clerics	Total
Fourth	33	3	109	144
Fifth	49	1	126	171
Sixth	45	1	131	177
Seventh	41	1	137	179
Eighth	30	---	136	166
Ninth	27	1	137	165
Tenth	24	1	138	163
Eleventh	26	1	137	164
Twelfth	36	1	137	174
Total	311	10	1188	1505

(Data gathered by author, 2023)

Parliament's approval of the Darcy contract, which included 30 cleric representatives and 136 non-cleric representatives. However, contrary to the official historiographical narrative, there is no record of the clergy's slightest opposition to the aforementioned agreement.<sup>82</sup> Instead, Seyed Hassan Taghizadeh was to blame for all betrayal and weaknesses. Additionally, it was with the help of clerics that Reza Shah first attempted to codify *Sharia* law by merging and injecting it into a modern legal system. Ironically, most, if not all, secular authoritarian states in postcolonial Muslim contexts have done this and unconsciously contributed to the legalization/codification of *Sharia*.

### The clergy as critics of Reza Shah

There are only four recorded instances of confrontation between the clergy and Reza Shah: Haj Agha Nurollah Esfahani's objection to the formation of a national army (1927); Ayatollah Agha Mirza Sadegh Tabrizi and Abulhasan Anzeji's objection to the conscription law (1928); Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Bafghi's objection to women's unveiling (1928); and Ayatollah Seyed Hossein Qomi's followers' protest against the Goharshad mosque uprising.

The first instance occurred in Qom in 1927, in the form of a protest against the conscription law. Official historians refer to this protest as the "Qom Uprising" and introduce it as "the first clerics' unified movement against Reza Khan's anti-religious and counter-cultural policies."<sup>83</sup> This protest lasted for 100 days and ended with Haj Agha Nurollah Esfahani's suspicious death on January 4, 1927. However, these clerics were not objecting to anti-religious and anti-cultural policies, but instead to the formation of a national army, which would deprive both landowners and the clergy of cheap workers, as such would be sent from the villages for military service. This action resulted in the gradual elimination of land ownership in Iran and the loss of an important source of income for the clergy—endowment and non-endowment lands. The formation of the national army was a step toward military preparation in defense of the homeland (in line with the recommendations of Islam), and was in no way a non-Islamic matter that could be interpreted as "Reza Khan's anti-religious and

<sup>82</sup> For the official historiography narrative, see Mohammad Rahim Eivazi, *Islamic Revolution and its Historical Roots*, 5th ed. (Tehran: Payam Noor University, 2019), 61–63; Mousa Najafi and Mousa Faghieh Haqqani, *Ibid.*, 442–443.

<sup>83</sup> Research Group of Islamic Revolution History Foundation and Encyclopedia, "Unpublished Documents of Ayatollah Boroujerdi's Association with Haj Agha Nurollah Esfahani's Uprising during Reza Khan's Period," *15th Khordad Quarterly* 18 (2020): 82.



counter-culture act.” Instead of protesting the dictatorship, the clergy appealed for “the membership of five first-rate scholars in the parliament, the removal of anti-religion content in the press, implementation of *Sharia* rules and prevention of prostitution, organization of religious lectures, and establishment of religious schools.”<sup>84</sup> However, it was not a religious motive that led clerics to protest. Reza Shah’s efforts ended the clergy’s monopoly over the education system and financial transactions, endangering their income and social capital. Tabriz scholars, led by Ayatollah Agha Mirza Sadeqh Tabrizi and Abul Hasan Anzeji, also protested in support of the Qom demonstrations in 1928. As historians affiliated with the Islamic Republic describe:

these two great *faqih* (jurists) rose up against Reza Khan’s autocracy and policies. Reza Khan exiled both of them to Kurdistan. Anzeji returned to Tabriz after a while, but Ayatollah Sadeqh Tabrizi spent the rest of his life in exile in Qom.<sup>85</sup>

There is no record of public support for either of these movements from the Iran and Najaf clergy or clerics employed in the government.

The confrontation of Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Bafghi is the third instance of clergy rising up against Reza Shah during the consolidation period. Two months after Sheikh Nurollah Esfahani’s protest subsided on March 29, 1928, Ismat al-Mulk Dolatshahi, Reza Shah’s wife, went to Qom for pilgrimage. According to Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Neishabouri,

Reza Shah ordered her to move in Qom without hijab so that women would be encouraged not to wear hijab. The king’s wife climbed up the stairs of Hazrat-e Masoumeh’s shrine without a veil and walked around the dome. Haj Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Bafghi went to the roof with some students to stop her from doing so.<sup>86</sup>

As soon as news of this protest got to Tehran, Reza Shah went to Qom and beat Sheikh Bafghi, then imprisoned him for six months. Finally, “with the mediation of Haj Sheikh Abdulkarim Haeri, he was released on the condition that he does not have the right to go to Qom and should live in Shah Abdol-Azim Hasani.”<sup>87</sup> No one in Qom, where Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi had recently established a seminary, protested the decision.

The Goharshad mosque uprising was the fourth clergy protest against Reza Shah. After Ayatollah Hossein Qomi, a resident of Qom, was informed about the hijab incident in Mashhad, he traveled to Tehran to speak with Reza Shah.<sup>88</sup> To this end, Ayatollah Qomi first went to Rey and waited for permission to visit Reza Shah, but his request was denied. Instead, his home was surrounded by the police. After news spread in Mashhad, a rally erupted and protesters went to the Goharshad mosque, including some armed young men intent on protecting elders and women. A total of 57 people carried swords, sticks, and axes, and seven brought rifles.<sup>89</sup> “In the confrontation with the police, 22 people were killed, 67 people were wounded, and seven soldiers joined the people.”<sup>90</sup> After this event, Ayatollah Qomi was exiled to Iraq.<sup>91</sup>

An important point, however, is that the high-ranking *ulama* in Najaf and Qom did not respond to the protests in Qom and Tabriz. Describing the political atmosphere in Qom in 1928, Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Neishaburi stated:

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 85–86.

<sup>85</sup> Ali Davani, *Iran’s Clergy Movement*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Islamic Revolution Records Center, 2015), 404.

<sup>86</sup> Mohammad Taghi Bohloul, *Political Memories with a look at Goharshad Mosque Uprising* (Isfahan: Arma, 2010), 34.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>88</sup> Ali Davani, *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>89</sup> Mohammad Taghi Bohloul, *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

Everything was ok in Qom. Scholars and clerics were busy with their chores. Haj Sheikh Abdulkarim was completely respected by the government and he sometimes sent letters to the king. Among other things, he asked the Shah for the young men of Qom and its suburbs to be exempted from military service, and Reza Shah agreed. But after a few months, drinking and outrageous behavior were seen among some youths of Qom. So, Sheikh Abdulkarim asked the Shah to call the youth of Qom to conscription. The Haj Mirza Nurollah Esfahani event and Sheikh Mohammad Taghi Bafghi's martyrdom had been completely forgotten.<sup>92</sup>

This report shows that, after the Qom and Tabriz uprisings, there was no political protest by clerics that turned into a nationwide struggle. Instead, Sheikh Abdulkarim Haeri had good relations with Reza Shah and was establishing the Qom seminary. Interestingly, everything was normal in Najaf. As Ayatollah Seyed Abulhasan Mousavi Esfahani advised Sheikh Bohloul:

You have no right to whip a woman because she does not wear a hijab and is a drinker. You should gently command people to pray, fast, pay *zakat*, undertake the *haj* pilgrimage, and other religious obligations, and refrain from drinking alcohol, gambling, fornication, usury, bribery, theft, betrayal, and lying .... If the Pahlavi government prevents your religious propaganda and the situation leads to struggle and bloodshed, the government is responsible, not you. Try to subdue the enemy without an armed war.<sup>93</sup>

Faghfoory believes that *ulama* did not agree with Reza Shah, so they resorted to *taqiyya*: “[the *ulama*] tended to hide their animosity toward the regime, while continuing to deny its legitimacy behind the scenes.”<sup>94</sup> He further explains the modernization of governmental structures and the change in political and economic systems during 1927–1941 as having a pivotal role in the decline of the clergy's political power and social status.<sup>95</sup> They were looking for an opportunity to change the situation:

Many among the clergy concluded that they were defeated by the state mainly because of their lack of organization and unity of action. This conclusion made them determined to regain the privileges they had lost under Reza Shah by resorting to organizational activities.<sup>96</sup>

The clerical establishment had almost always maintained the tradition of *taqiyya* and/or quietism in relation to the state. Only a few figures—such as Ayatollah Khomeini, among others—broke with this tradition in the 1960s.

## Conclusion

Our findings show that the clerical community did not react to Reza Shah's seizure of power with outright resistance and opposition, but instead with strategies of cooperation and quietism. This behavior was prevalent among clergy employed within the state bureaucracy system, who contributed to stabilizing the autocracy between 1925 and 1941. On the eve of the 1921 coup, Iran's social forces had to choose between economic development, social order, and security on the one hand, and constitutionalism on the other. While a few clerics, such as Modarres, still believed in the primacy of constitutionalism over security, a large number of clergy and intellectuals preferred the establishment of a strong government.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>94</sup> Faghfoory, “The Ulama-State Relations in Iran: 1921–1941,” 428.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>96</sup> Faghfoory, “The impact of modernization on the Ulama in Iran, 1925–1941,” 311.

The clergy serving in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches preferred to adapt themselves to the first Pahlavi reforms. All 72 clergy members of the Fourth and Fifth Parliaments could have played an important role in preventing the establishment of autocracy, but instead they upheld Reza Khan as the war minister eight times in different cabinets, with the turning point being 47 clergy representatives in the Fifth Parliament voting to change the monarchy from the Qajars to Pahlavi. In the parliaments formed between May 1926 and November 1941, a total of 268 clergy and seven of their sons approved laws that further consolidated the dictatorship. Additionally, the clergy's role in the executive branch during the establishment and consolidation period is undeniable. In the transition to and consolidation of Reza Shah's government (March 3, 1920, to May 4, 1925) and the stabilization period (May 4, 1925, to September 3, 1940), 16 clerics and 27 of their sons served as ministers under Reza Shah.

In addition, the post-revolution description of Reza Shah as removing clergy from judicial posts is not historically accurate. Iran's first civil law was adapted from French civil law under the leadership of Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Fatemi and in collaboration with Nasrallah Sadat Akhavi, Mohsen Sadr, Mohammad Kazem Assar, Mohammad Reza Irawani, Mohammad Boroujerdi, Asadullah Mamaghani, and Alibaba Firouzkohi.<sup>97</sup> The new civil law was taught to the judges for a year, who were then tested and ranked from one to twelve.

Contrary to the Islamic Republic's portrayal of Ayatollah Modarres as a shrewd politician, he in fact unintentionally provided the conditions for Reza Shah's to rise to power, despite his opposition. Such opposition included: his withdrawal of opposition to Mohammad Ali Jazayeri's credentials; his role in the bread famine crisis, the dismissal of the constitutionalist Prime Minister Hossein Moshir al-Doleh, and the rise of Minister of War Reza Khan to the position of prime minister; and his approval of Reza Khan's appointment to Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, a powerful position from which he could not be removed without parliament's permission and forcing Motamen al-Mulk to resign as the parliament's president.

Highlighting Ayatollah Seyed Mahmoud Hosseini's role in opposing Reza Shah at the Constituent Assembly without considering the supporting role of 86 other clergy members is a clear example of historiography influenced by power and ideology mixed with distortion, concealment, and denial after the Islamic Revolution. Some clerics' opposition to Reza Shah did not mean intellectual support for autocracy. Although some nationalist intellectuals cooperated with Reza Shah in creating a modern and absolute monarchy, this cooperation was not unlimited or permanent, and there is much evidence to support this claim. For example, contrary to clerics who usually approved the government's actions, the Communist Party of Iran introduced Reza Shah as a puppet and agent of imperialism. In response, the government banned the activities of the United Workers' Council and arrested 156 labor organizers from 1929 to 1935, most of whom were exiled and five of whom lost their lives. In May 1937, 53 communists were arrested, who became known as "the group of 53" in the history of Iran. Their detention shows the simultaneous struggle of intellectuals, administrators, workers, and even peasants against the first Pahlavi autocracy. These events occurred when the clergy held prominent judicial positions, and during the trial of the group of 53, 26 clergy were members of the Eleventh Majlis.

While a few clerics were briefly imprisoned during Reza Shah's time, a large number of intellectuals were imprisoned for opposing the government. Out of the 53 communists arrested in May 1937, only five were released and 48 others remained in prison until September 1941. There is also a notable gap between intellectuals and the clergy in terms of the number of political activists executed. Ayatollah Seyed Hassan Modarres was the only cleric who died, while at least eight intellectuals died, including Dr. Taghi Arani, Mirzade Eshghi, Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi, and five members of the United Workers'

<sup>97</sup> Hassan Zandieh and Tal'at Deh Pahlavani, "The Role of Shiite Clerics in the Codification of Iran's Civil Law during the First Pahlavi Era: With an Emphasis on the Role of Seyyed Muhammad Fatemi Qomi," *Contemporary Political Studies* 4, no. 8 (2013): 86–87.

Council.<sup>98</sup> Thus, our findings confirm a problem with the state's official historiography in post-revolutionary Iran (praising clergy) as well as monarchists' official historiography (praising and constructing Reza Shah as anti-clerical from the start). After the revolution, official historiography in Iran has been influenced by power, ideology, and knowledge mixed with distortion, concealment, and denial, as explained by Michel Foucault.

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<sup>98</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran between two Revolutions*, 174.

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