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Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History

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ABSTRACT

Government in Iran was arbitrary from ancient times. The ruler and the officials appointed by him were not, each according to his station, bound by any body of established rules and traditions, except the expediencies which were necessary to maintain them in power and authority, that is, to prevent their decline and demise. Thus, in principle, rulers and officials were not answerable for their actions except to the authorities above themselves, or - in the case of the ruler himself - to God, from whom he was believed to have received his dominion over the entire society. Absence of established rules and procedures for determining legitimacy and succession, and non-existence of aristocratic and other ruling classes which acted as the state's social base, were the chief causes of the insecurity of the position and the lives of rulers, princes of the blood, chief ministers, and other high officials, since the latter's successful coups or rebellions would have been sufficient for the ruler to lose his power and be replaced by the leader of the coup or rebellion.

1. Introduction

Arbitrary rule anywhere, anytime and in any context—be it a society, a party or a firm—would necessarily involve problems of legitimacy and succession in ways which are not experienced in any system based on a body of binding and long-term, fundamental laws. Theoretically, it would not look impossible for any ruler to rule by his own will and decisions up to the limit of his physical power even when his power was initially based on some basic law or tradition. This after all seems to have been the case under European absolutist or despotic—sometimes described as "new"—monarchies, which ruled Europe between circa 1500 and 1900 for the continent taken as a

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whole: in England from the beginning of the Tudors in 1485 to the Glorious Revolution of 1688,[1] in France from the beginnings of the 16th century, from Louis XII or Francis I of the Valois to the Revolution of 1789, which abolished the absolute rule of the Bourbons,[2] in the Holy Roman (Habsburg)Empire over the same period, until the revolution of 1848. In Prussia, from the peace of Westphalia in 1648—when it begins to emerge as a modern state—likewise to the 1848 revolution; in Russia, from the accession of the Romanovs in 1617 (although the tradition went back as far as the Principalities of Novgorod and Muscovy) to the revolution of 1905.[3]

2. Legitimacy and Succession in Europe[4]

European absolutist rule was the same in its basic features in the entire period and in all European countries, but there were important differences through time as well as space. For example, power was concentrated in

1. See, for example, S. T. Bindoff, *Tudor England*, (London: Pelican, 1952); Christopher Morris, *The Tudors* (London: Fontana / Collins, 1966); J. P. Kenyon, *The Stuarts* (London: Fontana, 1966).
2. See, for example, H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), Book II, chapters III and XIV; G. N. Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*, second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); C. V. Wedgwood, *Richelieu and the French Monarchy* (London: The English Universities Press, 1958); Maurice Ashley, *Louis XIV and the Greatness of France* (London: The English Universities Press, 1966); David Ogg, *Louis XIV* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Arthur Hassall, *Mazarin* (London: Macmillan, 1903); Alfred Coban, *A History of Modern France* , Vol. I, 1715-1799 (London: Penguin books, 1963).
3. Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*; Herbert H. Rowen, ed., *From Absolutism to Revolution, 1648-1848* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1963); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution in Europe, 1789-1848* (London: ABACUS, 1977); Melvin Kranzberg, *1848; A Turning Point?* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1959); Fisher, *A History of Europe*, Books II and III; Irene Collins, *The Age of Progress*, *A Survey of European History between 1789 and 1870* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970).
4. For detailed accounts of this author's theory of arbitrary rule in Iran see, for example, "Arbitrary rule, A Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 24, 1, 1997; "Liberty and Licence in the Constitutional Revolution of Iran", *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 3,8,2,1998; "Towards a General Theory of Iranian Revolutions", *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis,* 15, 2, 1999; "European Liberalisms and Modern Concepts of Liberty in Iran", *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis,* 16, 2, 2000; "Problems of Political Development in Iran: Democracy, Dictatorship or Arbitrary Rule?", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 22, 4, 1995; "Problems of Democracy and the Public Sphere in Modern Iran", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18, 2, 1998. All of the above articles are reprinted in Homa Katouzian, *Iranian History and Politics, the Dialectics of State and Society in Iran*, (London and New York: Routledge, paperback edition, 2007). See also Katouzian, *ibid* chapter 1, "The Theory of Arbitrary Rule: Status and Implications;" See for application of the theory to a crucial period in modern Iranian history, Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran, the Eclipse of the Qajars and the Rise of the Pahlavis* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, paperback edition, 2006).

different degrees between Francis I and Louis XIV of France, between Henry VII and Elizabeth I of England, between Charles V and Maria Theresa of the Habsburg empire, and so on. Likewise, there was more or less centralisation of administration over time and across the continent. In general, there was less administrative centralisation in the Renaissance period, and there was (sometimes much) less so in one country than another; for example, administrative power was considerably less centralised in the Habsburg empire than in the latter period of Bourbon France.[1] In Russia, power was highly concentrated and centralised, in part perhaps as a legacy of the medieval Tartar rule.[2]

But the absolutist state was far from an arbitrary state in many fundamental ways. With regard to power, absolutist rule was not arbitrary in the very fundamental sense that the ruler legally had "the absolute power of laying down the law, but he did not have the absolute power of exercising lawlessness."[3] It was not within the power of the absolutist ruler, for example, to order the execution of any aristocrat or a member of the gentry or merchant classes without observing the existing judicial laws and procedures, nor could he plunder anyone's property in land or capital. There were sometimes harsh and exploitative taxes in operation, but there was no arbitrary and unpredictable pillage of the countryside by the government or its forces and agents. Likewise, landlords extracted the agricultural surplus according to certain traditional rules, but otherwise did not have the right to

1. "Absolutism does not invariably entail the centralisation of power and administration.… Absolutism adjusts perfectly well to a federal state, or to a simple commonwealth or a monarchical constitution, as Spain, Austria and Prussia were until the end of the *ancien régime*." See, Emile Lousse, "Absolutism" in Heinz Lobasz (ed.) *The Development of the Modern State* (London: Macmillan 1964); see further, John Russell Major, "The Limitations of Absolutism in 'The New Monarchies'" in Arthur J. Salvin, ed., *The New Monarchies and Representative Assemblies, Medieval Constitutionalism or Modern Absolutism?* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1964).
2. See B. H. Sumner, *Survey of Russian History* (London: Duckworth, 1947); Gladys Scot Thompson, *Catherine the Great and the Expansion of Russia*, (London: English Universities Press, 1950).
3. See Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (London and New York: Macmillan and New York University Press, 1981), 21.

"fleece" the peasants for as much as was permitted by the latter's productivity and their own sense of propriety.[1] Charles Stuart—"that man against whom the Lord hath witnessed," as Cromwell described him—was tried and executed, not for absolute rule, which was then in accordance with the law of the land, but for arbitrary government, which by definition was not. And, although the revolutionary court that tried him probably exaggerated Charles's tendency to rule arbitrarily, they nevertheless cited such enforced decisions as the illegal tax known as "ship money," which he had imposed on his subjects.[2]

It followed that in absolutist states the rules of legitimacy and of succession were normally secure and inviolable. Primogeniture was the principal rule that, in the absolutist as well as feudal state which it had replaced, governed succession, a rule which was also firmly in force in the case of landed estates.[3] The duke's or earl's first in line was as firmly entitled to inherit his wealth and title as was the king's first in line to inherit his kingdom. The "first in line" in either case would be the first son or the nearest surviving male relative (females could in principle become monarchs in England since Mary Tudor; in Austria, only Maria Theresa inherited the throne, though even that was attained with great difficulty and on the condition that she shared the throne with her husband; and in Russia, Anna, Elizabeth and the two Catherine inherited the throne). James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) was the legitimate successor to Elizabeth I

1. For extensive accounts of official pillage and extortion of the peasantry in Iranian history, see Ann K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia, A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1953); Willem Floor, *A Fiscal History of Iran in the Safavid and Qajar Periods*, Persian Studies Series 17, General Editor Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Homa Katouzian's review of the latter book in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 11, 2, 2001.

2. See, for example, C. V. Wedgwood, *The Trial of Charles I* (London: Thorpe, 1964); Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974).

3. In some countries there were other variations, for example, in Scotland, the first in line was the king's eldest brother, and in some East European countries other royals might legitimately succeed to the throne.

through a distant and complicated relationship, which none the less made him first in line to the English throne.[1]

It is important to emphasise that strictly speaking neither the king nor the aristocrats could have any say over the rules of succession, whereas merchants and other capitalists had the freedom of will over the inheritance of their estate. And this was not surprising since the survival of manorial feudal estate ownership depended on it (and on the law of entail); and since—unlike the merchant classes—it was extremely difficult for those of non-aristocratic descent to be selected to its membership, and impossible for any king to be such. Even in the odd case of Poland where the habit grew of "electing" their king, the election was made only from royal or old aristocratic families: in the early 1570s they elected Henry Duke of Anjou, first in line to the French throne, who, barely having arrived in Warsaw, returned to Paris as Henry III upon the untimely death of his brother Charles IX.[2]

Thus, royal succession according to established procedures was the most basic requirement for a king's legitimacy, not only in the feudal period, but also under absolutist rule. Apart from that, the support or co-operation of the church was also necessary, despite the fact that its powers had been trimmed in the latter period. The power of the established church was less after the Reformation than before, even in Catholic Latin countries. Still, it was one of the pillars of legitimacy for the absolutist government. Indeed, in countries like Spain, Austria, France, and England, which (unlike most of Germany, the Low Countries, and Switzerland) were united under a single monarch, the existence of an established as well as episcopal church was seen as necessary for the strength of the king's authority. James I, who ruled a fundamentally Protestant country and, besides, fancied himself as a theorist

1. See, for example, Neville Williams, *Elizabeth Queen of England* (London: Sphere Books, 1971); Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Panther, 1970); Bindoff, *Tudor England*.
2. See, H. W. C. Davis, *Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1970); R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe, From Constantine to St Louis* (London: Longman, 1974), Part II, chapters V-IX. G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Herbert Butterfield *et. al.*, *A Short History of France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); Fisher, *A History of Europe*.

of pure despotic rule, at the same time was fond of saying, "no bishop, no king."[1] It is important to note that while the principle of "no bishop, no king" emphasises the usefulness of an established, indeed episcopal, church for the king's power and authority, at the same time it clearly shows his formal dependency on a class of people outside of himself.

The aristocracy provided the other main pillar for the king's authority, once again as in the feudal period but at a reduced scale. The merchant or bourgeois classes were by now another principal social base for the state, such that in the early Renaissance period the state used their support to reduce the aristocratic magnates, perhaps the biggest examples of this being the triumph, in the 15th century, of Louis XI over the so-called League of the Public Good, led by Charles the Bold of Burgundy, and the City of London's support for Henry Tudor in his fight against Richard III, which put an end to Wars of the Roses as well as the Plantagenets. Yet, not long afterwards the aristocracy (and gentry) became once again the state's principal social base next to the church, which jointly underpinned the legitimacy of absolutist rule. It would be quite reasonable to argue that Charles Stuart's greatest misfortune was that both of these two pillars of the state were divided in their attitude towards him, at least until his trial in January 1649. It was in the same decade that, upon the death of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu one after the other, the rebellion of some of France's grandest aristocrats as well as the judicial authorities of Paris (known as the Paris *Parlement*) in the two successive *Frondes* caused great disruptions for the government of the very young Louis XVI and his regent and minister, Queen Anne and Cardinal Mazarin.[2]

1. See Charles, Howard. McIlwain, ed., *The Political Works of James I* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965); Hugh Trevor-Roper, "James I and the Bishops" in Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Historical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1957).

2. See, for example, Maurice Ashley, *Louis XIV and the Greatness of France* (London 1964); David Ogg, *Louis XIV;* Hassall, *Mazarin* (London: Macmillan, 1903); Wedgwood, *Richelieu and the French Monarchy.*

3. Divine Grace and legitimacy

In Iran there was no law or entrenched tradition which made succession predictable and/or legitimate before the event. The most fundamental rule for succession and legitimacy was not primogeniture, although being a son or relative of the ruler was helpful. It was the possession of *farr-e izadi* or God's Grace, which is sometimes translated as "divine effulsion." Anyone in possession of the Grace would have the right to succeed or accede to the throne, and his rule would therefore be regarded as legitimate. But before discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this principle and its great differences with European traditions, it would be necessary to explain its exact meaning and practical application from original sources of Persian literature and Iranian history.

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is the greatest single source on the Grace and its use in Persian literature in the broad sense of this term. Here, rulers are said to have the right to succession because they possess the Grace, their rule is both legitimate and just for the same reason, and they lose the Grace and therefore their legitimacy when they become unjust. Rebellion would then be justified, and if successful, the rebel leader is deemed to have the Grace and would become the legitimate successor and leader.

The theory or myth of God's Grace, and the consequences of its possession and loss in practice, are spread virtually all over *Shahnameh*, including the purely mythological, the heroic or epic, and the "historical" parts of the poem. Significantly, the Grace takes a physical form on one occasion, and perhaps even more significantly this occurs in the "historical" part, the story of Ardeshir, son of Babak, descendent of Sasan, and founder of the Sasanian empire. When Ardeshir is running away from the last Arsacid emperor, Ardevan and is being chased by him, the latter reaches a town (*shahr*) through which the former has passed. He asks if Ardeshsir had been seen there and is told that they had seen:

A ram galloping after a rider
More beautiful than fabulous pictures

Ardavan's counsel then tells him it would be useless to go on chasing the man, because the Grace in the form of the Ram is accompanying him:

Said the counsel to Ardevan thus
You would best return from this point
Since his [Ardeshir's] Grace is following him
To chase him would be as good as to chase the wind.
When Ardevan heard the counsel's word
He realised that his days were numbered[1]

The same story is told more elaborately in the Pahlavi text, *Karnamak-e Artakhshir-e Papakan*:

Ardevan was surprised and said it looks as if there are two riders instead of one. What is that Ram? The counsel said it is God's Grace which has not yet caught up with him. We must ride up so we might be able to catch him [Ardeshir] before the Grace reaches him first.

After a while, Ardevan is told that the Ram has been seen riding at the back of Ardevan's horse, and he asks the counsel:

What is the meaning of the Ram sitting behind his [Ardeshir's] horseback? "May you live forever," answered the counsel, the Grace has caught up with him and it is now impossible to catch him. There is no point in troubling yourself, the riders and the horses any more. You should try to deal with Ardeshir in other ways.[2]

The relief in Naqsh-e Rostam shows Ardeshir receiving the Grace or *farr* in the shape of a diadem from Ahura Mazda. Both man and god are shown mounted on horseback while the Grace is being bestowed, trampling Ardevan and Ahriman under the horse's hooves. All this shows the supernatural as well as mythical nature of the Grace (see further below).

1. See Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, The Naficy-Berukhim edition in honor of the poet's millennium (Tehran: Berukhim, 1934). (The recent edition by Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh, which is not yet widely available, is generally thought to be the most authoritative. But since our purpose in this study is not affected by linguistic or purely literary detail, the present edition is quite adequate). See vol. VII, pp. 1636-1637.

2. See "Karnameh-ye Ardeshir-e Babakan", in *Zand-e Vohuman Yasn va Karnameh-ye Ardeshir-e Babakan*, tr. Sadeq Hedayat, (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1963).

The Perfect Ruler and the Just Ruler

Ferdowsi has put forward a remarkable model or theory of the "Perfect Ruler." This occurs in the preface to the story of Key Khosrow after he has replaced his grandfather Key Kavus upon the latter's retirement. Key Khosrow is the quintessential example of the just ruler in the heroic and mythical parts of *Shahnameh*. The long story of "the coming and passing" of Key Khosrow (to borrow from Tennyson in the case of the legend of King Arthur), despite it being continuous, is in fact in two parts. The first part is the continuation of the heroic martyrdom of his father Siyavosh (or Siyavash), when he is found by Giv in Khotan and runs away with him and his own mother from his maternal grandfather Afrasiyab, and crosses the Oxus into Iranian lands. This is followed by events in Iran which lead to his succession to the throne upon the retirement of his grandfather Key Kavus.

At this point the second part of his story begins, and it is in the preface to the latter story that Ferdowsi presents his theory of the perfect ruler, probably based on his own understanding of the subject from the various *Shahnameh* sources he had known. It is remarkable in its simplicity and clarity, and the fact that it resembles a modern abstract model, an "ideal type" in Weber's terminology, in order to delineate the basic features of a social phenomenon.

It is clear from *Shahnameh* that the just ruler must hold and maintain the grace. In other words, the holding of the grace is both necessary and sufficient for a ruler to be legitimate. But, according to Ferdowsi's model, the *perfect* just ruler must have qualities, of which the Grace is only the necessary condition. The second condition is to be of "pure seeds;" perhaps meaning of royal descent though it has not been so specified. The third is the ability to learn from others, and correct his mistakes rather than taking offence when offered good advice. Having laid down these three conditions, Ferdowsi then suggests a fourth one for complete perfection: the wisdom (*kherad*) to be able to distinguish right from wrong, an apparently simple quality, but an extremely rare one if it is to include the whole of a person's

thoughts and deeds. He does not explicitly use one or another word for perfection, but it is clear from the text, because he says that if all the four conditions were fulfilled then the ruler would be free of all need, except that he would still be mortal:

When someone fulfils these four conditions
He would be free from want, from pain, from sorrow
Except death, from which there is no escape…
The four qualities would free a heroic ruler from all need[1]…

This seems to be the nearest that man may come to being godhead, but for the fact that he is not immortal. Seen in this light, the concept does not seem to be too far from that of the Shi'i imams, from a purely analytical point of view (though it is hardly necessary to emphasise the fact that the imamate has its own theological basis, meaning, and implications in the Shi'i faith). Putting aside some radical views which have regarded the imams as certain manifestations of God, they too are the sinless and infallible but not immortal deputies of God on earth.

But a just ruler as such does not have to be perfect, although, as noted, he must have the most important quality, the possession of the Grace in order to be just and legitimate, a quality which is demonstrably a paranormal gift. We have already described the case of Ardeshir from the "historical" period. Fereydun and Key Khosrow present the best examples from the mythical and heroic periods. "Blessed Fereydun" is born with "the Grace of *shahanshahi,"* destined to destroy Zahhak (or Azhdahak), the epitome of an unjust ruler and killer of his father Abtin. Typically of Middle Eastern lore, Zahhak dreams that a newborn baby boy will eventually put an end to him and so orders all such to be put to death. However, his mother manages to hide Fereydun and he grows up in the care of a supernatural cow, which Zahhak destroys in revenge. Eventually, he gathers a force, goes to the aid of the revolt led by Kaveh the Blacksmith, defeats the Unjust Ruler and chains him in Mount Damavand. On their way to join battle with Zahhak, he and

1. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, III: 756-766.

his force perform the supernatural feat of crossing River Ervand (Tigris) safely on foot and horseback.[1] In its basic aspects the story has common features with many myths and legends of Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East, including walking on water, which has been claimed later even for some great Sufis.

Giv finds Key Khosrow hiding in the wilderness from his Turanian maternal grandfather Afrasiyab, and accompanies him together with his mother Farangis (read Farigis by some recent scholars) in their attempt to escape into Iran. They too cross the Oxus, another river, and this time in the east, in stormy spring weather. When the **b**oatman refuses to take them across:

Giv told the Shah (Key Khosrow), being who you are
Water will greet you with naught but friendliness
Fereydun who crossed River Ervand
And reached the elevated throne of greatness
A whole world became his subjects
Since he was with Light and with the Grace
How could the water wrong you?
While acting with the Grace, and deserving authority?[2]

Key Khosrow then rides into the river, followed by Giv and Farangis (Farigis), and they cross safely to the Iranian side of the Oxus. The boatman is astounded at the sight and tells both his colleagues and Afrasiyab, when the latter arrives too late on the scene, that neither he nor his father before him had ever seen such an extraordinary feat performed by anyone. "No wise man could regard them as ordinary human beings;" "They may have been born of the blowing wind / Sent to the people by *Yazdan*".[3] Key Khosrow's father Siyavosh had proven his innocence of the charge of

1. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh,* I; 37-62.
2. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh,* III: 741-742.
3. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh,* III: 743-744.

seeking the favors of his stepmother Sudabeh, by riding through a corridor of fire.[1]

Later when Key Kavus, Key Khosrow grandfather, favors the latter to succeed him, Tus, the army commander in chief, objects and suggests Fariborz, first in line, son of Key Kavus and uncle of Key Khosrow, but Gudarz brushes it aside, pointing out that the latter clearly had the grace, since he had ridden over water like Fereydun. Besides, Gudarz adds: "Blessed Angel Sorush [messenger of God] told me in a dream / Key Khosrow's Grace will save Iran from turmoil." Kavus decides on a test of the possession of the Grace. He sends his son Fariborz together with the latter's champion Tus to conquer Bahman Fortress, which is defended by a troop of demons. They fail. But when Key Khosrow is sent, he captures the fortress and destroys the demons by an extraordinary feat of action.[2]

It is clear then, (a) that the Grace and its possession is a gift of God which carries paranormal or mysterious qualities, and (b) that it is the crucial and fundamental test for succession and legitimacy over and above any other, including primogeniture, or indeed royal descent. The problem however is that whereas in a mythological world supernatural feats may be performed or tests conducted to determine a claimant's legitimacy, in the world of reality there will not be any public test for it, a test, that is, which like primogeniture may be observed commonly by all concerned.

Legitimacy and rebellion

The last point is absolutely crucial. The legitimate ruler is one who is anointed by God to act as his vicegerent on earth. Two fundamental differences emerge from God's Grace theory as compared to the European rule of primogeniture. First, that in the real world there cannot be an objective test of legitimate succession and rule. Or, in other words, this can be known merely by virtue of the fact that a pretender or claimant succeeds

1. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh,* III: 550-553.
2. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh,* III: 747-763.

and maintains power, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Primogeniture unambiguously conferred legitimacy to the first in line to the throne, a rule that the king (or for that matter the feudal lord) himself did not have the power to contradict. There could be argument about it as that between William of Normandy and Harold of England, and even though ultimately the sword determined this case, first there had been a legal battle in which the Pope had cast his vote in William's favor. Otherwise, rebellion was treasonable, and even if it succeeded it could not confer legitimacy unless it was successfully led by a prince or aristocrat and supported by a sizeable portion of the ruling classes— the aristocracy and (later) gentry. That would be civil war like the successful revolt of Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, against his cousin Richard II; or the Wars of the Roses; and even the rise of Henry Tudor against Richard III, the last of the Plantanganets.[1] Or, from French history, the unsuccessful rebellion of Henry Duke of Guise against Henry III, and the successful revolt, at the same time, of Henry of Bourbon, king of Navarre, later Henry IV, against the same king of France, the last of the Valois.[2] Whereas on the basis of the myth, tradition, or theory of *farr-e izadi*, virtually anyone could hold power, thus claiming that he had the *farr*, and anyone could be claimed to have lost it by virtue of a successful rebellion against him.

The second fundamental difference between the two traditions follows directly from the first. Since Iranian succession and legitimacy were entirely determined by a divine gift which almost any one could be deemed to possess by virtue of attaining power and maintaining it, he was in no way bound by any entrenched tradition or (written or unwritten) legal framework. And *ipso facto,* he was not dependent on the consent—other than enforced

1. The hereditary claim of Henry IV was not as good as the boy earl of March (great grandson of Clarence, elder brother of John of Gaunt) but he was told not to base his accession on the right of conquest since he would then be regarded as a rebel. See, for example, Sir George Clark, *English History, A Survey* (Oxford: The Clarenden Press, 1971); E. L. Woodward, *History of England* (London: Mehthuen, 1947); John Harvey, *The Plantagenets* (London: Fontana / Collins, 1976).

2. See, A. G. Dickens, *The Age of Humanism and Reformation: Europe in the Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1977); Fisher, *A History of Europe.*

submission—of any part of the society, whether high or low, which is contrary to various European traditions from the classical through medieval to modern and contemporary times.

Plainly it appears from the evidence that the real test of holding the *farr* was success itself, the fact that the ruler actually held and maintained supreme power. For apart from the mythological examples of Ardeshir carrying the Ram—the symbol of *farrahi*—on horseback, or Fereydun and Key Khosrow riding through wide and turbulent rivers, or the latter's father Siyavosh riding through fire, it is clear that the holding of *farr* was recognised *ex post facto*; that is, by the rule of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: in a real world, he had the *farr* and was therefore legitimate as ruler who was actually in power and ruled effectively. The position resembles some recent theories that the ***vali*** or leader in an Islamic state emerges as a manifestation of the will of God, and would therefore lose authority and/or fall by divine will alone, by the society or people, or by any of their parts, not having any say in the matter. This view had been explicitly discarded in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but has made a comeback in recent years.

This had a dialectical effect on the position of the ruler. On the one hand, and contrary to the position even of the absolute rulers of Europe, he was not bound by any earthly law, tradition or restraint, and could exercise authority at will up to the limits of his actual physical power, which, for prudent rulers, included consideration of limits to which the society would tolerate their actions. On the other hand, he almost constantly faced the fear of palace coups and potential rebellions, because, unlike in Europe, virtually all that potential rebels needed for taking power with at least equal "legitimacy" was to succeed. In fact the "legitimacy" of the successful rebel was nearly always greater at first than that of the fallen ruler, since (for reasons arising from these and other features of arbitrary rule) the society normally disliked its rulers and wished them to be replaced by one who was "less unjust" or "more just." Predictably, arbitrary state and arbitrary society, unaccountable

government and ungovernable society were two sides of the same coin. That was another principal dialectic of Iranian history.[1]

Yet, insofar as the theory of Divine Grace was concerned, there had to be a theoretical justification for successful rebellion. That is to say, since the ruler was deemed to be in power by virtue of divine will, there had to be a rule whereby his overthrow by a palace coup or public revolt would be considered legitimate; or what is the same thing, that the rule of the rebel successor would be regarded as legitimate. Predictably, this could happen only when the arbitrary ruler rebelled against God, that is, against the very and only authority from whom the Grace emanated. In *Shahnameh*, the arbitrary ruler's revolt against God could take either of two forms. One was for the ruler to claim divinity and expect to be worshipped as God; the other was to rule unjustly, to fail in his duties towards his "flock," and to oppress the people. The first and supreme example of a ruler who claimed divinity was Jamshid, whom God therefore punished by bringing the people's revolt upon him, who supported Zahhak to bring him down and put him to flight (although eventually—after 100 years—he found him "in China Sea" and cut him into two halves).[2]

As noted, Zahhak himself went down a similar way by the revolt of Kaveh and Fereydun (or Faridun), who held the *farr*, as seems to be evident also from his name. Key Khosrow [3], *Shahnameh*'s most just as well as heroic shah, gave up his rule in the end for fear of either claiming divinity, like Jamshid and Zahhak, both of whom he cited as examples, or by becoming unjust, like his own grandfathers Key Kavus and Afrasiyab, both of whom he also cited as examples.[4] This shows that the risk of a "just" ruler becoming eventually "unjust" was very high. Key Khosrow's successor Lohrasb is also claimed to have retired voluntarily, and likewise Gashstasp,

1. See further Katouzian, *Iranian History and Politics*, and *State and Society in Iran*, especially chapter 1.
2. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, I: 23-34.
3. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, I: 34-62.
4. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, V: 1405.

the latter's son, father of Esfandyar the Invincible and the first ruler to accept and propagate Zoroaster's teaching (see further below).

All of the above examples are from the earlier, mythical and heroic parts of *Shahnameh*. In the "historical" period, Hormoz, son of the very successful Khosrow I (Anushiravan the Just) and the epitome of the just ruler in pre-Islamic history, kills all of his father's officials and advisers upon succeeding his father (a typical sequence of events on the succession of a new ruler). Significantly, this is not regarded as a sign of unjust rule, probably because it was not followed by a revolt and because the massacred men were unpopular, as virtually all state officials of relatively long duration were in Iran's long history. But later Hormoz offends and alienates his highly gifted general Bahram Chubineh who rebels against him, and further, his son Khosrow, who in consequence joins the rebel general, though this time the rebellion does not succeed. Eventually, there is a successful revolt led by two other generals and by Khosrow's maternal uncles. Hormoz is overthrown and blinded (later killed), and his son is put in his place as Khosrow II (Parviz or Aparviz).[1]

In this important historical example it is difficult to see in what way Hormoz is deemed to have been unjust. The apparently senseless killing of his father's officials and advisers was not an act of injustice, did not result in the withdrawal of the Grace, and so was not followed by rebellion. Whereas, incautious and tactless (rather than unjust) behavior later led to his demise and death. In other words, his injustice seems not to have been determined by his apparently unjust behavior in massacring the state officials, but by his ineptitude in dealing with Chubin, his own son and other rebels. This case shows in a remarkably clear way the extent to which the concept of justice in this context is likely to have been pragmatic and bound up with sheer success in maintaining power, which would naturally include efficient

1. Ferdowsi, .VIII, pp. 2566 / 2675: "Bandui and Gostahm [Khosrow's uncles] then realised / That the Shah's fortune had turned; They entered the imperial palace / Straight to the Grace-holding Shah; As they took the crown off the Shah's head / They threw him down the throne; They then put a red hot bar on the Shah's eyes; His brilliant candles thus darkened".

maintenance of domestic order and external security. Khosrow II had a similar fate to his father and was killed after a palace coup led by his rebel son Shiruyeh, and the process of his downfall, once again, tends to confirm our interpretation of the concept of justice used in this context.[1] Were Khosraw I (Anushiravan the Just) and Abbas I (the Great) too, epitomes of the just ruler before and after Islam, so regarded largely because they were very successful in maintaining peace and order, and defending their subjects well against foreign aggression?

Legitimacy in the Islamic era

The term *farr* was also used to confirm the divine legitimacy of post-Islamic rulers. Ferdowsi himself applies the term to Mahmud of Ghazna and his rule in a number of his prefaces to various books of *Shahnameh*. For example: "World Ruler Mahmud, owner of *farr* and generosity.…The Book has begun with his name / His *farr* whitens dark hearts like ivory."[2] Later, in the preface to the story of Esfandiyar's Seven Khans: "[I shall] write in confirmation of Mahmud Shah / By that *farr* and that Eternal Diadem"[3].…And still later, when opening the story of Rostam and Shaghad: "In the name of World Ruler, Abolqasem, Mahmud Shah / He who is the *farr* of Diadem and Authority; Lord of Iran, Turan and India / By whose *farr* the world is like Rumi [the highest quality] silk."[4]

Later, the content and implications of the Grace were expressed more often in such titles as "Shadow of the Almighty" and "Pivot of the Universe," just as the concept of the just ruler persisted in the form of *Malek-e Adel* and *Soltan-e Adel*. The Koranic verse is ambiguous which orders the believer to obey "God, the Prophet, *and the holders of authority (ul al-'Amr) among you*" (emphasis added), and was often invoked to

1. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, IX, pp. 2893-2908.
2. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, IV, p. 1554, just as Ferdawsi resumes his own writing after the 1000 incorporated distiches of Daqiqi come to an end.
3. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, IV, p. 1584.
4. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, VI , p. 1729.

legitimise earthly rule, and so it has been subject to various conflicting interpretations.[1] However, it is not clear from the text itself how in practice the legitimacy bestowed by God's command to a ruler may be known except by virtue of the fact that he holds the reins of power. Therefore, *from the point of view of the subject in hand*, its implications are similar to those of the concept of "God's Grace."

No doubt Islamic concepts and theories of legitimate worldly authority emerged from the Koran, various bodies of Tradition, and the theological and jurisprudential arguments and decisions based upon them. The comparison here made refers simply to the practical implications of the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic concepts, not to their strict religious or metaphysical origins. Equally, the sultanate and, even more so, caliphate were concepts that emerged and were justified on the basis of Islamic doctrine and tradition. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to deny their practical resemblance—sometimes down to small detail—to pre-Islamic Iranian traditions.

About forty years after the completion of Fredowsi's *Shahnameh,* Abolfazl Beyhaqi presents an Islamic version of the concept of Iranian government in the preamble to his history of Mas'ud (son of Mahmud) of Ghazna**.** First he compares rulers with prophets and messengers of God as the two groups who are chosen by God to guide and rule the people:

Know that God Almighty has bestowed one [type of] ability to prophets…and another [type] to *padshahan.* And he has made it obligatory to human beings (*khalq-e jahan)* to submit to those two forces and so realise the correct path of Divine (*Izadi)* will.

Remarkably, he locates the prophets' distinction in their ability to perform miracles, and the rulers' distinction in their astuteness and strength to overcome their enemies and to run the world with the justice required of them by God:

1. See further, Ann K.S. Lambton, "Islamic Political Thought", in Joseph Schacht and C.E. Bosworth (eds.), *The Legacy of Islam*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

Therefore the ability of prophets, peace be upon them all, is in the miracle which they perform, that is, things the like of which humans are incapable of doing. And the ability of *padshahan* is in astuteness and strength to overcome their enemies and bring justice to the world in line with the will of God (*Izad*) Almighty.

At this point, Baihaqi makes a sharp distinction between the true ruler, he who has the Grace, and the usurper and rebel, using the very Islamic term *khareji* for the latter:

Given that the difference between true (*mo'yyad*) and successful (*movaffaq*) rulers and the rebel impostors is that when rulers are just, of good deeds, good behavior and good effects, they must be obeyed and regarded as rightly chosen. And the impostors who are unjust and commit bad deeds must be considered to be rebels (*khareji*) and a Holy War (jihad) must be fought against them.[1]

And he goes on to add that that is the criterion by which good and bad rulers must be distinguished from each other and so it becomes clear "which one must be obeyed." The people must observe and see if they are just, good-natured, truly religious, able to make the people to flourish and subdue impostors and wrongdoers, so that "it will be clear that they have been chosen by God, and obedience to them is obligatory."[2] Once again, as in pre-Islamic times, God alone bestows legitimacy, and the test of legitimacy is "justice," that is, keeping the peace for the society to flourish, and subduing the unjust and aggressors.

Nezam al-Molk, too, opens his *Siyasat Nameh* or *Siyar al-Muluk* with quite similar views about the subject:

In every age and time God chooses a member of the human race, having endowed him with goodly and kingly virtues, entrusts him with the interests of the world and the well-being of his servants; he chooses that person to

1. See Abolfazl Beyhaqi, *Tarikh-e Beyhaqi*, Ali Akbar Fayyaz, ed., (Tehran: Department of Culture, 1995), pp. 116-117.
2. Baeyaqi, *Tarikh-e Baeyaqi, PP. 116-117.*

close the doors of corruption, confusion and discord, and he imparts to him much dignity and majesty in the hearts of men, that under his rule they may live their lives in constant security and ever wish the reign to continue.[1]

The just ruler would choose good servants and put them to work, would leave in peace those of his flocks who are obedient to him, and would develop the country:

He selects ministers and their functionaries from among the people…and…relies upon them for the efficient conduct of affairs spiritual and temporal. [And those of his flocks who] tread the path of obedience…he will keep…untroubled by hardship, so that they may duly pass their time in the shadow of his justice… further he will bring to pass that which concerns the advance of civilisation [development] such as constructing underground channels, digging main canals, …raising fortifications, building new towns.…He will have inns built on the highways and schools for those who seek knowledge.…[2]

It is therefore clear that, however the Divine Grace may have been (or deemed to have been) acquired, both in the pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions the ruler was held to be God's vicegerent on earth, and so his will was beyond limits set by any terrestrial law or tradition so long as he was successful in enforcing peace and security and imposing consent on the people. That is, his rule was divinely ordained, and he was legitimate by virtue of God's grace. Therefore he was not bound by any tacit or explicit contract with other individuals or social groups. He was above, not merely at the head of the society.

"Divine right of kings" was the theory developed in the sixteenth and—particularly—seventeenth centuries as the basis for the legitimacy of

1. See *The Siyar al-Muluk or Siysat-Nama of Nizam al-Mulk*, translated from the Persian by Hubert Darke (London ; Boston : Routledge & K. Paul,1978), p. 9, and its Persian original, Hubert Darke (ed.), (Tehran: Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab, 1968), p. 11.

2. *Siyar al-Muluk*, English translation, pp.9-10; Persian original, pp. 12-13. For a wider study of medieval Iranian history, see Ann K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

European absolute monarchy. The theory was advanced in various—and sometimes conflicting—versions. In general, they cited the divinely ordained kingship of biblical rulers such as King David to prove their case (Filmer being an important exception to this), but it is sometimes believed that their real model was that of the ancient Persian kingship, which they knew from classical European sources. The divine right theory is not quite the same as the Persian God's grace theory.[1] Of much greater importance, however, is that the practice of absolute monarchy, which the theory sought to justify, was far from arbitrary government. James I of England came closest to the Persian God's grace theory when he wrote that kings were God's vicegerents on earth. And in a conflict with the judges of the prerogative court, he wrote that to put in doubt what belonged to the "mystery" of the king's power was against the law.[2] Yet the very fact that he had to argue with judges about his prerogatives, and even to invoke "the Law" against them, gives the lie to any supposition of the right of arbitrary rule. Besides, James himself was emphatic about the rule of primogeniture as the basis of his own legitimacy, and his son Charles I took his stand in 1649 against his revolutionary accusers solely on the basis of the law of the land.[3]

4. The problem of succession

It follows directly from the above that almost invariably succession presented a problem. It was never clear who would succeed to the throne

1. For a comprehensive study of divine right of kings, see John Neville Figgs, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914). For a classical version of the theory, see Jacque Beningne Boussuet, 'The Divine Right of Kings', in William F. Church, ed., *The Greatness of Louis XIV* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1959). For arguments over the divine right theory among Robert Filmer, Algernon Sidney, John Locke, *et. al.,* see F. J. Hearnshaw (ed.)*The Social and Political Ideas of Some English Thinkers of the Augustan Age, 1650-1750* (London: Harraps, 1928), especially chapter 2.
2. See McIllwain, *The Political Works of James I.*
3. Wedgwood, *Trial of Charles I.* The European divine right and the Iranian God's Grace theories have been compared at some length in the author's previous studies. See, for example, "Arbitrary rule, A Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran" (reprinted in *Iranian History and Politics*), *State and Society in Iran*, chapter 1, and "Farrah-ye Izadi va Haqq-e Elahi-ye Padshahan", *Ettela'at Siyasi-Eqtesadi,* 9&10, 1998, reprinted in *Tazadd-e Dowlat o Mellat, Nazariyeh-ye Tarikh va Siyasat dar Iran*, Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 2002

after the ruler's death. It is remarkable that in *Shahnameh*'s legendary and heroic period some of the most important rulers are said to retire voluntarily and nominate their own successor. There was serious controversy, as noted, when Key Kavus nominated his grandson Key Khosrow to succeed him, after deciding, or so it is said, to retire from supreme authority and disappear in snows on the horizin. And the matter was settled by a test to see whether he or his uncle Fariborz possessed grace.

There was much more serious dissent when Key Khosrow nominated his relative Lohrasb to succeed him in his own lifetime. Indeed, there was an outcry by the notables, and Zal (Rostam's father) in particular claimed that Lohrasb neither had the Grace nor was he of good stock. He described him as a little man (*forumayeh*). But once Khey Khosrow reasserted his view, he repented and retracted his opposition.[1] The retiring shah "disappears in the snow" shortly afterwards.

In what looks more clearly like a palace coup, Gashtasb replaced his father Lohrasb in the next round. His relationship with his father had been far from amicable. Hence he had secretly left Iran and spent years in Rum and married the Cesar's daughter Katayun.[2] On returning home, he was virtually acclaimed as the new ruler, his brother explaining in a fleeting remark that their father Lohrasb had grown too old and preferred to spend the rest of his days in Nowbahar, the [Bhuddist] temple in Balkh.[3]

The case of Gashtasb's own "voluntary" retirement in favor of his grandson Bahman is even more suspect. The story of Gashtasb's rule begins with the 1000 distiches written by Daqiqi on the advent of Zoroaster and Gashtasb's conversion to his teaching, which Ferdowsi has openly incorporated in his own text. He behaves treacherously towards his son Esfandiyar the Invincible, and in the end virtually forces him to subdue

1. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, V, pp. 1407-1434.
2. Rum should normally mean Byzantium, otherwise Greece or possibly Rome, though none of them would be strictly consistent with the legend here: Byzantium, even Rome, belong to a later period, and Greece did not have an emperor. But that is the stuff of which legends are made.
3. *Shahnameh*, VI, pp. 1445-1494.

Rostam. The latter is prepared to submit voluntarily, but Esfandiyar insists on his father's order that he must be brought in chains, and so Rostam kills him in battle by hitting—on *simorgh*'s instruction—his vulnerable eye (as Achilles was hit in his heel, and Siegfried in his back, in Greek and German mythology). He thus joins the other two heroic young martyrs of old, Siyavosh and Sohrab. His father Gashtab is blamed for his death. The Prince's mother tells her husband and shah, "You lost the Grace and sense of right and wrong /You will [soon] face the judgment of God"; and his daughters tell him, "Neither *Simorgh*, nor Rostam nor Zal killed him / You did, and so stop wailing." Shortly afterwards he "voluntarily" gives up the throne to Esfandiyar's son, Bahman: He tells him, "My time is over / I have been drowned up to my forehead…; Now you try to rule with justice /Be just and therefore free of sorrow."[1]

In real history, no ruler ever retired voluntarily; if they fell before natural death, they were overthrown and/or murdered. As for who might succeed after the ruler's natural death, the shah himself might have had his own candidate, usually one of his sons, though not necessarily the eldest. But this did not guarantee his succession because there was no *legal sanction* behind it. A dramatic example is presented by the conflict over succession after the death of Mahmud of Ghazneh, the mighty warrior ruler whose will, as long as he lived, prevailed without the slightest question, and he struck fear farther and wider even than the empire which he ruled with an iron hand. He nominated his younger son Mohammad, and did everything in his power before his own death to ensure his succession. Shortly after Mohammad succeeded, his elder brother Mas'ud, governor of Isfahan, rebelled, fought and defeated him, and thereby became the legitimate successor. The fate of Mohammad was sealed as soon as it became apparent that Mas'd was the likely winner. Even great magnates as loyal to their father and to Mohammad as Amir Ali Dayeh defected to Mas'ud, although he knew there

1. *Shahnameh*, VI, pp. 1495-1747.

was little chance of his survival, as in fact there turned out to be none.[1] It was clear even to Hasanak the Vazir that it was too late to change his mind, and so his demise was more dramatic and less undignified than the others.[2]

The problem of succession persisted down to the nineteenth century. Fath'ali Shah chose his grandson Mohammad Mirza as his successor after the death of his son Abbas Mirza, the prince regent and Mohammad's father, though he knew that it would cause serious dissent among his other sons and so delayed its announcement for as long as it was possible.[3] Yet, some of Mohammad's uncles rebelled against him when he succeeded to the throne.[4] Later, Mohammad Shah himself was known to favor his younger son Abbas Mirza (Nayeb al-Saltaneh, later Molk Ara) in preference to his eldest son Naser al-Din, the heir apparent. When the latter managed to succeed his father, the nine-year-old Abbas Mirza would have lost his life or been blinded if foreign envoys and Amir Kabir had not intervened on his behalf. But his court was looted on official orders, and later he spent much of his life as a refugee in Mesopotamia and Russia. Permission for him to go to Mesopotamia as an exile was obtained as a result of persistent interventions of both the British and Russian ministers in Tehran to stop him from being

1. See the opening pages of *Tarikh-e Beyhaqi*, i. e., what has survived of the book's chapter 5, which includes the story of Mas'ud's successful revolt and the defection of the notables.
2. See further, Homa Katouzian, "The Execution of Amir Hasank the Vazir', *Pembroke Papers*, 1, 1990", reprinted in *Iranian History and Politics*.
3. See Ann.K.S. Lambton, *Qajar Persia*, Austin (Austin: Texas University Press, 1988).
4. See, for example, Mehdi Bamdad, *Sharh-e Hal-e Rejal-e Iran*, I-IV (Tehran: Zavvar, 1992), on the killing, blinding, and/or imprisonment of his brothers and uncles, either because of their open rebellion or because of mere suspicion. See, for example, the entries in Volume I for Hasan Ali Mirza, Khosrow Mirza, and Jahangir Mirza, but there were a few others as well.

   Mohammad Shah also had his able minister, Mirza Abolqasem, the younger Qa'em-Maqam, suddenly arrested and strangled to death not long after mounting the throne with the latter's indispensable help. This is famous. What is not so well known is that, like most ministers in Iranian history, Qa'em-Maqam was unpopular, and that he had also played a leading role in the demise of those princes, whether guilty or merely suspected. It must be emphasised that Mohammad Shah was one of the least blood-thirsty of Iranian rules. Indeed, he displayed strong Sufi sympathies.

   On the troubles over Mohammad Shah's succession, see also Mohammad Ebrahim Bastani Parizi, "Asiya-ye Haft Sang" in *Asiya-ye Haft Sang* (Tehran: Bastani, 1988); and Denis Wright, *The Persians amongst The English: Episodes in Anglo-Persian History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985).

killed at the age of thirteen by his brother the shah on the mere supposition that he might be regarded as their alternative candidate for the throne by some unknown, imagined intriguers.

The correspondence between the two foreign envoys and the chief minister makes fascinating reading. At one stage, when the British minister wrote that they should not sacrifice "fairness" to mere imagination (that there is a plot centered around the boy), the chief minister revealed the logic of arbitrary injustice, by pointing out that in that country one should act on mere supposition, for otherwise he may lose the game. And this was so precisely because "legitimacy" always belonged to the winner. He wrote that he had reported the British minister's letter to the shah. The shah had agreed with the minister that he meant well, but had added that:

Your excellency must pay attention to some peculiar Iranian customs and traditions and realise that, in Iran, the things that your excellency has in mind will not work, and one cannot be immune from the evil intent of seditious and rebellious people. If the leaders of the Iranian state wish to act on the basis of fairness and justice to maintain order and security for all their subjects, *they would have no choice but at the slightest thought, imagination or supposition of rebellion, irrespective of who it might be, to try to put it down forthwith and not to hesitate even for a moment.*[1]

At any rate, the problem of royal succession eventually came to an end as a result of Russian and British guarantees of the succession of the heir-designate to the throne. Yet it is extremely instructive that Naser al-Din Shah, who was by no means the worst example of an arbitrary ruler of Iran, almost withdrew the right of succession from his son and heir-designate, Mozaffar al-Din Mirza (governor-general of Azebaijan), and sold it to his other son, Zel al-Soltan, governor-general of Isfahan. He wrote to the former that the latter had offered him two (Persian) crore—roughly a million tomans

1. See Abdolhossein Nava'i, ed., *Sharh-e Hal-e Abbas Mirza Molk Ara*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Babak, 1982). The letters have been published from the Iranian archives in Abbas Eqbal-e Ashtiyani's introduction to the book; see pp.29-31, emphasis added.

- for the position. Zel was well known both for his shrewdness and lack of scruples. Mozaffar was lucky, therefore, that, in reply to the shah his father, his able secretary Amir Nezam Garrusi, warned that Zel might well spend another ten crores for the shah's position itself.[1] It was, of course, an open secret that Zel was doing everything possible (including offering subservience to the British) to overthrow his father. There could be no better evidence at any rate for the unpredictability of succession in Iranian history that, not much longer than a hundred years ago, it looked quite normal for the shah to sell the succession for money.

Legitimacy and succession being so much determined by mere success, by the mere fact of gaining and holding power by virtually anyone, it is not surprising that there was so much filicide, fratricide, parricide and killing of ministers, generals and tribal chiefs within the royal domain. Apart from outright killing, the blinding and/or permanent incarceration of princes within the women's compound (*haram* or *andarun*) was a favorite Safavid device. It was from the *andarun* that Shah Safi emerged to claim the throne of his grandfather, Abbas I, and ruled with exemplary cruelty. And it would not take much imagination to think of the magnitude of insecurity in which ministers, chieftains, and magnates lived and worked—and sometimes died. The familiar story—from ancient to modern times—of the long line of such powerful persons who (alone or together with their family and clan) perished on the order of their rulers, told in detail, would fill several volumes of chilling history.

There were few chief ministers and important high officials, and especially few of the most able of them, who survived the suspicion, wrath, or treachery of their masters, either because they feared their ability and strength or wanted to plunder their wealth and property, or both. A few relatively recent cases are well known, particularly those of Abdolhossein Teymurtash, Amir Kabir and Qaem-Maqam. But, like so many other features

1. See Bastani Parizi, *Asiya-ye Haf Sang*, p.644

of arbitrary state and society, this too was structural and systemic. The names of Ablofazl Bal'ami, Abolfath Bosti, Abol'abbas Esferayeni, Ahmad (son of) Hasan Maimandi, Hasanak the Vazir, Amid al-Molk Kondori, Nezam al-Molk Tusi, Ahmad Zia' al-Molk, the brothers Sham al-Din and Ata Malek Jovaini, Rashid al-Din Fazlollah, Emamqoli Khan, Hajj Ebrahim Kalantar, Qa'em-Maqam, Amir Nezam (Amir Kabir), Aqa Khan Nuri, Abdolhossein Taimurtash, Nosrat al-Dawleh Firuz, among so many others, readily spring to mind, from the Samanids down to recent times.[1]

It should be clear from the foregoing that there was no long term and continuous property-owning social class (or combination of classes) corresponding to the European aristocratic and gentry (and later, big bourgeois) classes to provide a strong social base for the state, legitimise its rule, and maintain its legitimacy over the long run. Property ownership was not a *right* but a *privilege,* and so it was subject to violation and change over relatively short runs. Therefore, to say that Iran was an arbitrary state and society is not to say or imply that there was no change in the long Iranian history. If anything, change was more frequent and, often, more rapid as well as more drastic. The "lack of continuity" which this author has described as a basic feature of Iranian society was precisely a consequence of the absence of long-term social classes and institutions, and more specifically the non-existence of a propertied, aristocratic peer class. The lack of long term security and continuity perhaps made the position of rulers no less, if not more, insecure than those of the princes, high officials, and wealthy members of the society. The tenuous nature of their positions, and danger to their lives, was the chief cause of the precarious positions of their officials, who might betray them to other pretenders or in their own cause.

1. See, for example, Beyhaqi's *Tarikh-e Beyhaqi,* Ravandi's *Rahat al-Sudur*, Rahsid al-Din Fazlollah's *Jame'al –Tavarikh*, Hamdollah Mostawfi's *Tarikh-e Gozideh*, Abdollah Shirazi's *Tarikh-e Vassaf,* Mirkhwand's *Rozat al-Safa*, Khwandmir's *Habib al-Siyar*, Aqili's *Asar al-Vozara*, Abbasi's *Tarikh-e Alam Ara*, Rezaqoli Khan Hedayat's, *Rozat al-Safa Naseri*, Lesan al-Molk's *Nasekh al-Tavarikh*, Mokhber al-Saltaneh Hedayat's *Khaterat o Khatarat.* See further, the entry on 'wazir' by Ann K. S. Lambton in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition), xi, 2001, pp. 192-194.

And it is for the same reasons that we have described Iran as a "short term society," a society in which both continuity and change—even important and fundamental change—tended to be short-term phenomena. And this was precisely due to the absence of an established and inviolable legal framework, which would guarantee long term continuity. Over any short term, there were notable military, administrative, and property-owning classes, but, unlike traditional European aristocracies and even merchant classes, their composition would not remain the same beyond one or two generations. Property and social positions in Iranian history were short term, precisely because they were regarded as personal privileges rather than inherited and inviolable social rights. The situation of those who possessed rank and property—except in very rare examples—was not the result of long-term inheritance (say, beyond two or three preceding generations) and they did not expect their heirs to continue in the same positions as a matter of course. The heirs could do so only if they managed to establish themselves on their own merits—the merits being personal traits necessary for success within the given social context. This did not exclude the position of the shah himself, since legitimacy and succession were nearly always subject to serious challenge, even rebellion.

Lack of long-term continuity, by definition, resulted in significant change from one short period to the next, such that *history became a series of connected short runs*. In this sense, therefore, change was more frequent—usually also more drastic—and social mobility across various classes was considerably higher than in traditional European societies. But, also by definition, lack of long-term continuity rendered *cumulative* change very difficult in the long term, including the long-term accumulation of property, wealth, capital, social and private institutions, even the institutions of

learning. These activities did normally proceed in every short term, but they had to be reconstructed or drastically altered in the following short terms.[1]

5. Concluding remarks

Arbitrary government necessarily meant that the ruler was not bound by any independent law or entrenched tradition which would act as a restraint on the exercise of power. The ruler could take decisions up to the utmost of his physical power, the only restraint being the expediencies which had to be observed in order to avoid potentially effective palace coups or general rebellions. God's Grace (*farr-e izadi*) was the myth or theory which justified arbitrary rule. The ruler was believed to have received his right to rule as a gift from God, a privilege which was both necessary and sufficient for his right to rule. Therefore, no terrestrial restraints or rules of conduct could legitimately bind his actions. He would lose the Grace and somehow fall from power (though often this did not happen in practice) if he openly claimed divinity, or was systematically unjust towards the people, particularly by being unable to maintain peace and stability. Rebellion would then be legitimate, and they would regard the successful rebel leader as having been bestowed with the Grace.

Ancient mythology apart, the only practical test of possessing grace in the real world was the fact of the ruler gaining and maintaining power, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which therefore was also the ultimate test of rightful succession. Hence, rebellion was "legitimate" once it succeeded. And for all these reasons it was never certain who would succeed a ruler even if he had clearly appointed an heir designate and had died while still in power. Succession was usually subject to serious dispute, even civil war, until the mid-nineteenth century when the heir-apparent's or heir-designate's succession was underpinned by great powers. Absence of established rules

1. See further Homa Katouzian, "The Short-Term Society: A Study in the Problems of Political and Economic Development in Iran", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, 1, January 2004, reprinted in this volume; *Iranian History and Politics* and *State and Society in Iran*.

and procedures for determining legitimacy and succession, and non-existence of aristocratic and other ruling classes which acted as the state's social base, were the chief causes of the insecurity of the position and the lives of rulers, princes of the blood, chief ministers, and other high officials, since the latter's successful coups or rebellions would have been sufficient for the ruler to lose his power (usually together with his life) and be replaced by the leader of the coup or rebellion.

These features were important aspects of the "lack of continuity" observed in Iranian society, which, despite its long history, was a "short term society," and its history consisted of a series of "connected short periods."