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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It is a complex, symmetrical design with multiple layers of geometric and organic patterns, rendered in a light beige color. It occupies the right half of the page and extends towards the bottom.

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
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A SUPERB BOOK FOR UNDERSTANDING IRAN

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Mehran Kamrava, *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 230 pp. (ISBN 978-1-0092-2464-2).

A dynastic history of Iran is a superb book for understanding Iran – Persia until the 1930s – since the late 18th century until the 1978-1979 revolution. Mehran Kamrava is an authority on Iran who wrote five monographs about Iran prior to the one under purview.¹ This book intends to «present a corrective» (xi) to one of his earlier works, *The political history of Modern Iran: from tribalism to theocracy*, published in 1992.

In his endeavor, Kamrava brilliantly succeeds in presenting a political history of Iran since the Qajar dynasty, through the interregnum and until the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty. The author traces the «rise and fall» of the two dynasties while explaining the dynamics at play prior to their rise to power, the political setting – both domestic and international – and the factors leading to their downfall. In doing so, Kamrava presents sharp analyses and shows a good knowledge of the relevant literature.

The 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution is a major watershed in Iranian history, changing the balance of power and provided political advantages to the ruled at the expense of the ruler. A sort of triangular coalition comprising merchants, clergy and intellectuals began voicing their opposition to the absolute power of the shah (44). Even though each of the three groups had its own objectives and interests, the effort to attain political rights from the state united them. The author emphasizes the role intellectuals played in their attempt at shaking off the status quo. Yet in reality their role was marginal, if not entirely eclipsed, once compared with the unwavering activities of the clergy. Among the reasons for this were «a weak theoretical grounding, internal contradictions, and infighting among intellectuals» (58). It is noteworthy that intellectuals, even during the reign of Reza Shah, cared less for political changes than for symbols of a sort of «western» modernity such as «Pahlavi caps» and the rejection of women's

1. *Revolution in Iran: Roots of Turmoil*, London, Routledge, 1990; *The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy*, New York, Praeger, 1992; *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008; *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022; *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic*, New York & London, Oxford University Press & Hurst, 2022.

veil, the *chadur*. In short, intellectuals found Reza Shah's policies on social issues worth praising (80). Overall, it is no exaggeration to say that the Iranian westernized intellectuals, despite being in favor of secularism at the discursive level, were not active forces in fostering real checks and balances to hinder the absolute power of the Shah. They were mainly anti-religion but hardly anti-dictatorship per se, finding the salvation of Iran in resorting to its pre-Islamic heritage as the first step to catch up with Western progress.

The clergy, conversely, took a different direction in their interaction with the two dynasties. Although divisions weakened their unity, a trend emerged among them that opposed intrusion from external powers. The 1872 Reuter Concession and veil restrictions are two good examples. The first put a nail in the coffin of national industrialization, granting Baron Julius de Reuter the 75% share of Iran's mines, except those that contained precious stones. The second took place in 1936 when female students at University of Tehran were legally forbidden from wearing the veil. In the two incidents, the clergy took the lead in opposing the ruler. This led to the acceptance of the religion by Iranian socialists, who saw religion represented by the clergy as one crucial element of the solution.

In his analysis of the history of the two Iranian dynasties, Kamrava adopts a top-down approach. While the book promises to render an account of the main forces constituting changes, giving rise, and, later on, bringing about, the fall of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, the focus remains mainly on the high echelon of power. As a result, the history of the state turns to be a chronology of the rulers combined in one book. Only when dealing with the events leading to the downfall of the Pahlavis attention is duly to the people. Otherwise, the masses are voiceless, having no real presence and agency in the history of a country shaped by absolute power domestically and geopolitically being at the mercy of Russia and Britain in their Great Game.

The 1978-1979 revolution opened a new era in Iran, transforming a secular state into a religious fundamentalist one. Kamrava rightfully argues that, despite being a rupture that marked an interregnum some characteristics remained intact under the rule of the ayatollahs. As a matter of fact, «neopatrimonialism, nationalism, economic underdevelopment, and political and cultural hybridity» (194) were driving forces prior to the Constitutional Revolution, during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, and in the aftermath of the Khomeini's ascendance to power. The result is a constant debate on the struggle between conservatism and modernity. After all, a mullah with a turban is replacing a king with a crown, ensuring the continuity of political hybridity that «simply changed names, from the shah to the *velayat-e faqih*» (194).

The book presents some typos and minor historical mistakes. The famous alchemist Jabir Ibn Hayyan is misspelled as Jaber ibn Hayyam. His death was in 813, according to Kamrava (6), whereas he actually died in 815. In addition, the author mentions the 1967 state visit to Tehran by the American vice-president Richard Nixon as the origin of the «Nixon Doc-

trine» (162). Whereas the chain of events is correct, Nixon was not officially incumbent as a vice-president, who was instead Hubert Humphrey. In fact, Nixon, as a former vice president and as a presidential candidate, made the decision «to make a series of foreign study trips».²

Also, despite the fact that Islam has two branches, Shia Islam and Sunni Islam, in the book the author makes this difference incomprehensible. At one point he compares «Sunna Islam» and «Shia faith» (6), rendering the latter a faith distinct from Islam. Later on, the two become identical as branches of Islam when in 1501 the Safavid dynasty replaced Sunnism by Shi'ism as the new Iranian dynasty state religion (38). The switch in terminology may escape the reader's attention in comprehending the adherence Shi'ism held to Islam, since it became a faith on its own.

To conclude, *A dynastic history of Iran* is an excellent book for anyone interested in understanding the recent political history of Iran. With the sharp analysis and deep understanding the author manifests in the book, together with his easy-to-read language, the book is of great significance to the general reader as a start to piece together the different parts of the history of a complicated country.

2. Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1978, p. 279.