

## **National Consultative Assembly (Majlis), First Term**

In the face of national struggle for a Constitution in Iran (then known as Persia), Muzaffaruddin Shah, the fifth king of the Qajar dynasty, issued a decree on August 5, 1906 for the creation of a Constitution and subsequently establishment of a national assembly in Iran. To that effect, rules of procedure were drawn up and endorsed by Muzaffaruddin Shah to clear the way for general elections in Tehran on September 16 that year.

The election for the first term of legislature was guild-based. Candidates from the following six groups could run for seats in the assembly: princes and Qajar descendants, clergy, aristocrats, business owners, ordinary shopkeepers and industrialists. (Abrahamian, 2004: 78) Nomads, farmers, and religious minorities except for Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Jews were not represented in the legislative body. There were a total of 156 electees including 60 in Tehran. The hopefuls standing in the election were required to be able to read, write, and speak in Persian. Meantime, every Iranian did not enjoy the right to vote. Women, criminals, and insane people, workers, houseboys and smallholders were denied the right to vote. The following groups were authorized to cast their ballots: 1. Princes and courtiers 2. Clerics 3. Aristocrats 4. Businesspeople 5. Business Owners 6. Farmers 7. Guild Members (Abrahamian, Ibid: 39 And Ettehadieh, 2002: 30)

After voting was over, the representatives of Tehran were divided into the following categories: 1. Princes and Qajar descendants (4 representatives) 2. Scholars and Clerics (4 representatives) 3. Traders (10 representative) 4. Landowners and Farmers (10 representatives) 5. Guilds (32 representatives)

An outstanding feature of the first national assembly in Iran was the dominance of middle-class; (Mirza Saleh, 2005: 761) 26% were guild leaders, 20% were clerics and 15% were tradesmen. (Shajiei, 1965: 180)

On October 7, 1906 Muzaffaruddin Shah, along with foreign ambassadors, courtiers and the electees, attended a ceremony at Golestan Palace and inaugurated the Persian National Consultative Assembly.

In its' first move, the Assembly voted on December 30, 1906 the first Persian Constitution, which was drafted in 51 articles based on the Belgium Constitution. The Constitution was rubber-stamped and approved quickly as it was voted five days before the Shah died. The Assembly feared that Crown Prince Mohammad Ali Mirza might refuse to sign off on the Constitution as he was known to be a stiff opponent of the charter.

After Muzaffaruddin Shah's death, the representatives moved to amend the Constitution by voting addendums because the Constitution lacked regulations for major national issues and it rather resembled a Rules of procedure.

Since the Constitution failed to satisfy some deputies, a committee was set up to revise the statutory law based on the Belgian, French, and Balkan constitutions. The Constitution Supplement, drafted in 107 articles, scrapped privileges for aristocrats and clerics and granted equal rights to all people. An independent judicial body was defined while establishment of public schools and obligatory education were envisioned. (Forouzesh, 2010)

All groups of legislators tried their best to include their own views in the Constitution Supplement. At that time, factions and guilds were not well organized and no party took

shape. However, their political views were clear. A group of 20 deputies were radical liberals and 35 were moderates. Radical lawmakers were close to the Social Democratic Party and they included some views favored by the Party in the Constitution Supplement. Freedom of expression, religion, pen, assemblies, and parties, and the accountability of ministers before the legislators were some of them. (Ettehadieh, Ibid: 32-33 and 204) The clerics did not sit idle and they fought for their own views. However, they were divided. Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri was among clerics who initially sided with Constitutionalists, but gradually opposed them citing the infiltration of anarchism, nihilism, naturalism, and socialism into the movement. He said he was seeking legitimate constitutionalism and he suggested that theologians monitor the law. Some radicals backed him and in articles 2 and 3 of the Supplement, it was stipulated that five scholars, endorsed by the Assembly, would supervise regulations. (Ettehadieh, Ibid: 43-46)

In addition to drafting the Constitution and its Supplement, the 1<sup>st</sup> Assembly also passed the following pieces of legislation: State and Provincial Associations Law, Municipality Law, Press Law, States and Provinces Establishment Law, Interior Ministry Law, Task Law, Scientific Auditing Law, Trade Associations Law, Law on Bribery and Relevant Punishments, Law on Royal Court Payments, Justice Law, Budget Law, and Administrative Spendings Law. (Shajiei, 1965: 135-136) In the first months of taking office, the Assembly started printing the outspoken Majlis daily newspaper. Modarresi and all, 2014: 42)

During its short lifetime, the first Assembly approved nine Cabinets. The first one was nominated by Moshir ad-Dowleh who had introduced eight ministers. (Ibid: 39)

But the most significant issue was the Assembly's saber-rattling with Muhammad Ali Shah. After ascending to the throne, the Shah did not invite lawmakers to his coronation on January 19, 1907 in a sign of opposition to the legislative body. He also refused to sign off on the royal decree on the Constitution. His refusal to endorse the Supplement to the Constitution was another sign of his non-recognition of constitutionalism. However, under pressure by legislators and public opinion, he signed off on the Supplement and recognized the Assembly. But the Majlis' move in rejecting a bill on getting loans from foreign governments and instead calling for the establishment of national bank for non-dependence on foreign governments, establishment of national army, resistance against Mirza Ali Askhar Khan Amin as-Sultan, better known as Minister of Despotism, slashing the Shah's salary, and demanding that some courtiers go into exile further put a strain on the Shah-Majlis relations. And finally, an assassination attempt on Muhammad Ali Shah on February 27, 1908 played well into the monarch's hands to launch an attack on the Assembly and order it dissolved.

Foreign governments, particularly Russia and Britain, were involved. These two countries were seeking to impose the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 on Iran. The treaty delineated spheres of influence in Persia. But the two governments were facing stiff resistance on the part of Majlis. That is why the Russians encouraged the Shah to dissolve the assembly and the British did not protest. (Ettehadieh, Ibid: 48) Finally on June 23, 1908, the Assembly was shelled by Kazakh soldiers commanded by Colonel V. Liakhov. Russia had ensured Britain that it had no intention of occupying Iran or destroying Majlis. Ottoman caliph Abdul Hamid was backing Muhammad Ali Shah against Majlis.

Some lawmakers were killed, some were arrested and some others fled and Majlis came to its end before it had completed its second year. The Minor Dictatorship era started in the country and lasted one year before preparations were made for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Assembly.

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