

# Popular Protest, Disorder, and Riot in Iran: The Tehran Crowd and the Rise of Riza Khan, 1921–1925\*

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**SUMMARY:** This article looks at the continuing political vitality of the urban crowd in early Pahlavi Iran and the role it played in the crises which wracked Tehran in the first half of the 1920s, examining, as far as possible, the ways in which crowds were mobilized, their composition, leaderships, and objectives. In particular it analyses Riza Khan's own adoption of populist tactics in his struggle with the Qajar dynasty in 1924–1925, and his regime's attempts to manipulate the Tehran crowd in an effort to overcome opposition, both elite and popular, and to intimidate formal democratic institutions such as the Majlis (parliament) and the independent press. In attempting to rescue the Tehran crowd from obscurity, or from condemnation as a fanatical and blindly reactionary mob, this article hopes to rectify the imbalance in much older scholarship which views early Pahlavi Iran solely through the prism of its state-building effort, and to introduce into the study of Iranian history some of the perspectives of "history from below".

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## INTRODUCTION

Early Pahlavi Iran has conventionally been seen through the prism of its state-building effort, the interwar decades characterized as a classic example of Middle Eastern "top-down modernization". In these years, according to this view, a new state, based on a secular, nationalist elite and acting as the sole initiator and agent of change, undertook a comprehensive and systematic reshaping of Iranian political, economic, social, and cultural life. The new state was understood as the only dynamic and modern element in an otherwise ossified and moribund "traditional" environment, while its critics and opponents were assumed to be, by definition, reactionary and obscurantist.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly attention remained focused on the high politics of the Tehran elite, and balance sheets drawn up based on assessments of the new state's

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1. The "orientalist" underpinnings of this view are clear.

success in transforming Iran into a modern nation-state according to a template drawn from European experience. Not only were broader, non-elite social groups and layers deemed to be merely passive objects of state policy but, insofar as they contested the state's agenda, were also considered as historically redundant and doomed to social extinction. Such was the typical view, at least until the revolution of 1979, of, for example, all varieties of popular urban leadership deriving from the mosque and the bazaar.

This version of the Pahlavi period has established such dominance that little attempt has been made to incorporate into the study of modern Iranian history some of the new approaches and analyses developed by social historians of other countries and regions. With the exception of gender studies, where a rich seam of experience has been mined, historians of Iran have so far made little effort to elucidate either the historical narrative or the perception of their own experience of non-elite groups such as the urban poor, non-metropolitan groups including the guilds and the bazaars of the provincial cities, or any social category in the countryside. In attempting to rescue the Tehran crowd from obscurity or from condemnation as a fanatical and blindly reactionary mob, the narrative which follows hopes to rectify the imbalance in much older scholarship and to introduce into the study of Iranian history some of the perspectives of "history from below".<sup>2</sup>

Although scholarship's tendency to focus on the state and its elite supporters has derived to a large extent from the political and academic perspectives and interests of historians working in the field, it has certainly been strongly reinforced by the difficulties of the sources.<sup>3</sup> The problems of studying even the European crowd are well-known.<sup>4</sup> Since those taking

2. The modern study of the "crowd" was pioneered by social historians such as George Rudé and E.P. Thompson, and has since generated much debate and a considerable literature particularly relating to the history of early modern and modern Europe. See, for example, George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England* (London, 1964); *idem*, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (London, 1970) and E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", in *idem*, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991). For a recent discussion of the literature see the introduction in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001). The concepts developed by Rudé *et al.* were quickly taken up and applied to Iran by Ervand Abrahamian; see his "The Crowd in Iranian Politics, 1905–1953", *Past and Present*, 41 (1968), pp. 184–210; "The Crowd in the Persian Revolution", *Iranian Studies*, 2:4 (1969), pp. 128–150. Since then, the application of this approach to Iranian history has received only sporadic attention, although it has continued to generate some scholarly research, for example, Stephen L. McFarland, "Anatomy of an Iranian Political Crowd: The Tehran Bread Riot of December 1942", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (1985), pp. 51–65.

3. For a discussion of this point see Stephanie Cronin, "Writing the History of Modern Iran: A Comment on Approaches and Sources", *Iran*, 36 (1998), pp. 175–184.

4. Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, pp. 3–16.

part in crowd actions have rarely left archival material of their own, and since extant descriptions have usually reflected elite (and hostile) attitudes, historians of European crowds have developed the use of sources such as police, prison, and especially legal, records, detailing instances in which the official world came directly into contact with the subaltern, to glean data about mass political action. Such research is barely even in its infancy in relation to Iranian history. Such sources as are available regarding the interventions of the Tehran crowd permit some discussion of its political role, but allow little more than occasional glimpses of its social composition.<sup>5</sup> The questions which have been asked in the course of the study of, for example, the French and English crowds, about both the general nature of the crowd and its behaviour and about its components, “the faces in the crowd”, their social origins, ages, occupations, and gender, may be raised in relation to the Tehran crowd of the early 1920s, but can as yet only be answered occasionally and in the most general terms.<sup>6</sup>

In February 1921 Riza Khan, an officer in the Iranian Cossack Division, captured political power in Tehran via a military coup and, by the end of 1925, he had overthrown the Qajar dynasty and made himself shah. Explanations of the success of his rise to supreme power have focused on his control of the coercive instruments of the new state (the army and the police), on his political astuteness, capacity to outmanoeuvre his opponents, personal strength of will and ruthlessness, and, crucially, on his acquisition of the backing of the British minister in Tehran, Percy

5. British archival material, although usually a source for diplomatic history or for the high politics of the Tehran elite, may be read and used differently, and such material, although inevitably reflecting the agenda of the British diplomatic and commercial establishment in Iran, may be found to contain important evidence for crowd activities and for “subaltern” history in general. The British minister in Tehran, the military attaché, the oriental secretary, and the provincial consuls were all preoccupied with the need for the creation of some form of political stability and order, a *sine qua non* for the advancement of British strategic interests. This led them to be intimately concerned with the progress of Riza Khan’s bid for political power, and the extent and nature of opposition to it. British archival material for the period under review is also diverse in that it records a struggle which was also underway among British diplomatic and consular personnel themselves regarding the correctness of Loraine’s decision to back Riza Khan against his myriad opponents, including those who had been and were still British clients. For this study, long reports such as that by the oriental secretary to the British legation, Havard, on the failure of the republican movement, and by Loraine himself on the 1925 bread riots, have been particularly important, while the data accumulated by the military attaché and reported in the fortnightly intelligence summaries has been invaluable for charting the course of oppositional tendencies among broad layers of the Tehran population.

6. The study of the crowd in countries under direct colonial rule has been a little easier owing to the colonial authorities’ accumulation of data and the preservation of colonial police, prison, judicial, and medical records. See, for example, David Arnold, “Looting, Grain Riots and Government Policy in South India, 1918”, *Past and Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 111–145.

7. These perspectives have dominated the analyses of both critics and admirers. See, for example, Stephanie Cronin, *The Army and the Creation of the Pahlavi State in Iran, 1910–1926* (London [etc.], 1997); Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the*



Figure 1. The constitutionalist crowd taking refuge (*bast*) in the British embassy in Tehran. Photograph courtesy of the Iranian Institute of Contemporary Historical Studies

Lorraine.<sup>7</sup> These explanations have usually been accompanied by a tendency to define Iranian politics as the exclusive preserve of a nationalist

*Emergence of the Pahlavis* (London [etc.], 2000); Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London [etc.], 1998); Mohammad Gholi Majid, *Great Britain and Reza Shah: The Plunder of Iran, 1921–1941* (Gainsville, FL, 2001); Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia, 1918–1925* (London, 1990).

elite and to imagine this elite, and the state which it constructed, as constituting the sole significant arena of political activity.

This tendency has led to an inclination to remain indifferent to, and has even rendered invisible, the strategies adopted in these years by a variety of subaltern elements external to this elite and often excluded from, or marginal to, the dominant secular nationalist discourse. Such elements comprised both plebeian social layers, the rural and urban poor; “traditional” groups such as the lower ranks of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars, the clergy) and the bazaar merchants and guilds; and new social categories called into existence by modernity itself, including an industrial working class, located especially in the oil fields of the south, and an intelligentsia which found employment as minor government officials, teachers, journalists, and so on. These layers and groups, historically lacking formal channels of political representation, had become accustomed to asserting themselves through mass popular actions, as a political “crowd”.<sup>8</sup>

The account which follows looks at the continuing political vitality of the urban crowd in early Pahlavi Iran and the role it played in the crises which wracked Tehran in the first half of the 1920s, examining, as far as possible, the ways in which crowds were mobilized, their composition, leaderships, and objectives. In particular it analyses Riza Khan’s own adoption of populist tactics in his struggle with the Qajar dynasty in 1924–1925 and his regime’s attempts to manipulate the Tehran crowd in an effort to overcome opposition, both elite and popular, and to intimidate formal democratic institutions such as the Majlis (parliament) and the independent press.

For the people of Iran’s towns and cities, as they entered the Pahlavi era, there was nothing unusual or exceptional about popular protests.<sup>9</sup> Such

8. The concept of the political or historical crowd employed in this article is derived from the theoretical framework elaborated by George Rudé. See especially Rudé, *Crowd in History*, the chapter “The Subject and Its Problems”, pp. 3–16. While rejecting too rigid a definition, Rudé denotes the historical crowd as a specific group, distinct from other phenomena such as “audience” crowds, and from collectivities too general and large to aggregate, such as a political party or “the general public”. Following Rudé, this article focuses on the crowd in terms of its mass actions, its “hostile outbursts” in the form of political demonstrations, strikes, and riots. Rudé’s formulations are especially relevant in another sense. His analysis of the period of the 1730s to the 1840s in French and English history as “years of transition” is strikingly applicable to the Tehran of the 1920s. Here too, political and economic changes were “transforming old institutions, uprooting the old society, changing old habits and modes of thinking and imposing new techniques”; Rudé, *Crowd in History*, p. 5. Such breaks with the past left their mark on the Tehran crowd, just as Rudé argues they shaped the French and English crowds.

9. Donald Quataert has pointed out the “everyday” character of popular protest in similar conditions in the Ottoman Empire; see *idem*, “Rural Unrest in the Ottoman Empire”, in Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury (eds), *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (Gainesville, FL, 1991), pp. 38–49

protests were, rather, a familiar feature of urban life throughout the country. They ranged from peaceful, even routine, actions designed merely to engage with the authorities and perhaps to change or modify a particular policy, through more determined and prolonged confrontations, to outright mass defiance emphasized by the use of different forms of violence. Urban crowds habitually employed a wide variety of methods in their efforts to influence, manipulate, resist, and sometimes confront local and national authorities. Indeed there existed a repertoire of actions with which both the people and the authorities were intimately acquainted and through which conflict between rulers and ruled could be choreographed. This repertoire was deeply ingrained in the historical experience of broad layers of especially the urban, but also to some extent the rural, populations, who resorted to it spontaneously and almost instinctively.

Among the actions constituting this repertoire, perhaps the most well-known are the addressing of appeals in the form of petitions and telegrams to the central authorities, either the government or the Majlis,<sup>10</sup> the use of mosques for political meetings, the taking of *bast* (sanctuary, asylum),<sup>11</sup> the guild strike and the closure of the bazaars, the distribution of anonymous and often menacing and intimidatory *shabnamahs* (broad-sheets),<sup>12</sup> and, when these methods were exhausted, collective bargaining through riot. These actions were, furthermore, ranked in a generally recognized hierarchy, ready to be adopted successively until the authorities responded, and there was a broad expectation on the part of those resorting to protest that the authorities were under an obligation to listen to their grievances and to offer remedies. The authorities themselves, largely lacking any effective coercive power and conscious of the necessity of consensus and consent, were often prepared to heed such demonstrations, especially once they reached a certain pitch.

Popular protests had traditionally been provoked by localized issues

10. For examples of petitions from merchants and guilds, see *Asnadi az Anjumanha-yi Baladi, Tujjar va Asnaf, 1300–1320*, 2 vols (Tehran, 1380).

11. Traditionally *bast*, refuge from temporal authority, might be sought in mosques, shrines, and royal palaces. During the nineteenth century, the concept of extraterritorial asylum appeared alongside the traditional notion of *bast*, and led to the use of legations and consulates. Although *bast* appears occasionally to have been used in premodern Iran as a form of social protest, the practice took on new life and dimensions from the late nineteenth century onwards, becoming a type of mass action with overtly political objectives. The most famous *bast* was that in July–August 1906, when thousands of people took refuge at the British legation, an action which led to the granting of a constitution. Upon its establishment in 1906, the Majlis immediately acquired the status of a place of *bast*, indicating the popular reverence in which it was held. Riza Shah gradually suppressed the custom of *bast* during the 1920s.

12. *Shabnamahs*, literally “night-letters”, were anonymous broadsheets, leaflets, or placards posted on city walls or other public places, or circulated by hand. They were often written using colourful and highly-charged language, their anonymity also freeing the author to make various kinds of specific or general threats.



Figure 2. The pro-constitutionalist Ayatollah Muhammad Kazim Khurasani preaching to a crowd.

*Photograph courtesy of the Iranian Institute of Contemporary Historical Studies*

such as resentment towards avaricious and oppressive governors. Since the late nineteenth century, however, mass urban protests in Tehran and the provincial cities had increasingly focused on issues of national politics, meeting with a large measure of success. The “tobacco protest” of 1891–1892, which included the closure of the bazaars in cities throughout Iran, the mass consumer boycott of tobacco, and demonstrations in the streets of Tehran, forced the shah to cancel his sale of the tobacco concession to a foreigner.<sup>13</sup> Most famous of all were the huge demonstrations and mass *basts* of 1905–1906, which led directly to the granting of a constitution and the convening of a national assembly or Majlis.<sup>14</sup>

Towns and cities throughout Iran were, therefore, the scenes of frequent popular protests. The Tehran crowd, however, occupied a unique position. Not only was it much larger than any crowd which could be mustered in a provincial city but, located in the capital with ready access to the Majlis,

13. Nikki Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891–2* (London, 1966).

14. See, *inter alia*, Abrahamian, “The Crowd in the Persian Revolution”; Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York, 1996).

the government, the shah, and the foreign legations, it was a political factor of the greatest significance, able to exert an influence, and sometimes a determining impact, on national politics. The Tehran crowd was therefore a potent political force, but it was rarely a spontaneous phenomenon, and it was not uniform in its social composition nor predictable in its political objectives. Rather, a variety of crowds might be called into action by different leaderships, with different objectives, sometimes “radical”, sometimes “conservative”, often defying such ready categorizations.<sup>15</sup>

The most common type of crowd was that which could be mobilized by the *ulama* and their allies in the bazaar, the merchants and the guilds. This type of crowd, composed of a mercantile and clerical leadership, with a mass following made up of guild artisans and the poor, was typically mobilized by issues with a religious element or which directly touched the interests of the *ulama* and the bazaar. Another crowd consisted of more modern social groups, for example lower-middle-class government employees, teachers, and journalists, and was more likely to espouse modern political and ideological positions. Occasionally different crowds might find themselves pitted, ideologically and even physically, against each other. More commonly, however, major protests would involve diverse urban crowds made up of both constituencies. In fact, most popular protests in the early 1920s were complex in both their social composition and their political agenda.

One especially sensitive barometer of the social composition of urban crowds was the presence of women in public protests. Where the protests were organized by a more conservative, especially religious, leadership, of some social standing and with a concern to maintain prestige and respectability, women were discouraged from participating and were in fact largely or totally absent. Where the protests were more spontaneous and plebeian in character, for example, bread riots, anti-conscription riots, or public protests at the arrests of striking workers, women were not only involved but sometimes played a central role.

Urban crowds, both in the capital and in the provincial cities, were assembled in a number of ways, through the print media, the respectable press and the more disreputable *shabnamah*, through word of mouth, and through deliberate mobilization by preachers in mosques, aided by their networks of supporters in the bazaars and the guilds. For the Iranian crowd, the national and provincial press was of particular significance, at least until the mid-1920s, when harsher censorship began to take effect. Since the late nineteenth century, the growth in literacy, the broader dissemination of nationalist ideas, the spread of print media, and the wider availability of crude printing methods, had led to the rapid emergence of a

15. For a discussion of the “conservative” crowd see Rudé, “Church and King’ Riots”, in *Crowd in History*, pp. 135–148.



public opinion, articulated through an independent press. By the early 1920s, the press was playing a role of central importance in shaping public opinion, in giving expression to popular political attitudes, and in encouraging and organizing mass protests. It had inherited this role particularly from the constitutional period when an explosion in newspaper and periodical publication of an engaged and critical character had first taken place.<sup>16</sup>

In the first years of Riza Khan's new regime, the Iranian press, continuing the traditions of the constitutional period, was both flourishing and extremely free in its language and its targets, and in this it reflected and gave shape to popular sentiments which received little expression elsewhere. Newspapers were crucial in organizing the huge demonstrations which took place in Tehran and in the provincial cities against the 1923 expulsion to Iran from Iraq, by the British mandatory authorities, of *ulama* who had criticized the British-organized elections. The press gave full and colourful expression to popular anti-British feeling, published news of protests, thus contributing to their rapid spread, and carried notices from the organizers of demonstrations giving precise details of the arrangements and calling for support. The *Sitarah-i Iran* of 25 October 1923, for example, carried a notice from the organizers outlining plans for a national demonstration to be held in three days' time against Britain and on behalf of the Iraqi *ulama*. According to the notice, the demonstration was called in the name of "Iran and Islam", and required the support of all the inhabitants of Tehran without the distinction of political party or faction. The notice further gave assembly points and times, routes, and told participants to carry black flags and march in an orderly, silent manner.

The publication of plans in the press might also serve to stamp a specific identity on particular acts of protest. In the case of the demonstration advertised in the *Sitarah-i Iran*, the organizing leadership, largely clerical, insisted in their notice that for various reasons "women should abstain from attending the demonstration; their part in it will be to urge their husbands and sons to be punctual in attending, in this way they can give the demonstration their moral support".<sup>17</sup> Clearly, not only did the socially conservative religious leadership feel that women's participation in such an event was inappropriate and might compromise its respectability, but this admonition that they should stay at home is a powerful indication that women were, in fact, in the habit of turning up to such events.

The influence of the press, in forming public opinion and providing an organizing medium for political protest, was far wider than the relative smallness of a fully literate readership might suggest. The early 1920s saw

16. See Afary, *Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, pp. 116–131.

17. Intelligence Summary (IS) no. 43, 27 October 1923, FO371/9020.

the proliferation of newspapers. In the year 1921–1922 licenses were issued for upwards of 200 newspapers in Tehran alone, and this in a town of some 300,000 inhabitants, barely one-tenth of whom could read or write.<sup>18</sup> Their circulation was not limited to those able to read and with the means to purchase a newspaper. Free reading rooms had been established in Tehran and in many provincial cities and newspapers were often distributed free. Articles might be read aloud in bazaars and marketplaces for the benefit of the illiterate, providing a focus for popular discussions. The urban, and even to some extent the rural, poor would thus be readily exposed to the contents of newspapers, and be able to transmit by word of mouth their contents, or versions thereof, further afield, the tradition of oral communication through extended family, kin, and neighbourhood networks still remaining strong.

An even more significant medium for the poorer classes were the anonymous broadsheets (*shabnamahs*, literally night-letters) which frequently appeared posted on city walls or circulated in bazaars. Those among the poor with the rudiments of literacy might participate not just in the consumption of these broadsheets but also in their production. These publications, freed by their anonymity from legal constraints or the fear of retribution, articulated directly, and sometimes menacingly, the grievances and demands of the oppressed. The expression of both specific and general threats was a noteworthy feature of a typical *shabnamah*.<sup>19</sup>

Both the “respectable” press and the *shabnamahs* shaped and expressed, in different ways and to different degrees, the attitudes of the poor, and sometimes gave direction to their energies. As well as the print media, speech was also a vital mobilizing tool. Anti-republicanism became a mass movement in 1924 largely because of the popular oratory of clerical figures such as Khalisizadah, the prayer-leader of the Tehran bazaar, and the Majlis deputy, Sayyid Hasan Mudarris, and their ability to use the mosques as an arena for political mobilization. A further potent ingredient contributing to the emerging subaltern discourse and to mass action was the prevalence of rumour. Although often distorted and even fantastical, rumours often expressed in a distilled and essential way the concerns of the powerless, and had, furthermore, the capacity to spread like wildfire, often being instrumental in sparking off local protests, both in the towns and in the countryside.<sup>20</sup> The bread riots in Tehran in 1925, for example, seem to

18. Annual Report, 1922, Loraine to Curzon, 16 July 1923, FO371/9051/E8057/8057/34.

19. On the general significance of anonymous threats, and the seriousness with which they were viewed by the authorities, see E.P. Thompson, “The Crime of Anonymity”, in D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (eds), *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1975), pp. 255–344.

20. There is a considerable literature on the role of rumour in popular politics. For some recent discussions, see, for example, Ethan H. Shagan, “Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII”, in Tim Harris (ed.) *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001),

have been both provoked and given direction by the spread, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes deliberate, of rumours combustible in the febrile atmosphere arising from genuine grain shortages.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE TEHRAN CROWD AND POPULAR PROTEST

For the first year and a half after his coup Riza Khan had concentrated on building up the army, on suppressing regional challenges to his power, and on consolidating his political position in the capital and within the government.<sup>22</sup> His methods, however, increasingly provoked both popular resentment and concern among the political elite and he was widely attacked in the press and the Majlis for his dictatorial behaviour. Against this background of political tension, the Tehran streets were increasingly the scenes of unrest.

Sometimes the protests were provoked solely by mundane matters, were orderly and carried out by “respectable” groups, such as the *bast* in the Majlis in September 1922 by 50 schoolteachers who had not received their pay, or the closure, around the same date, of 1,000 shops in the city as a protest against high rents.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, mass popular disorder manifested itself as “mob” violence, in the eruption of popular hostility towards minorities, Bahais, Zoroastrians, or Jews. Such outbreaks were indeed a typical feature of generalized political tension and were often the result of the deliberate channelling of popular grievances into directions more palatable to the authorities.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes, too, mass protests took place on more overtly political issues. The government’s attempts to curb the press in the autumn of 1922, for example, resulting in uproar in the Majlis, attacks on newspaper offices, rioting for and against the government in the streets, and the taking of *bast* by the *ulama*.

Popular protest was most effective when it involved an alliance between the *ulama*, supported by the bazaar, and the secular nationalists. The *ulama*’s ideological appeal for the urban poor and the bazaar’s

pp. 30–66; A. Fox, “Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England”, *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 597–620. For some discussion of the non-European world, see R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Delhi, 1982); A.A. Yang, “A Conversation of Rumours: The Language of Popular Mentalities in Late Nineteenth Century Colonial India”, *Journal of Social History*, 20 (1987), pp. 485–505. See also L. White, “Between Gluckman and Foucault: Historicizing Rumour and Gossip”, *Social Dynamics*, 20 (1994), pp. 75–92.

21. The impact and significance in the Iranian context of the twin phenomena of the circulation of *shabnamahs* and the persistence and tenacity of rumour still await research.

22. See Cronin, *The Army*, chs 4–6.

23. IS no. 37, 16 September 1922, FO371/7828/E12254/285/34.

24. For an account of the outbreak of anti-Jewish rioting which accompanied the political crisis of September 1922, see IS no. 38, 23 September 1922, FO371/7828/E12259/285/34.

organizational power, coupled with the nationalists' influence as shapers of public opinion via the press and the Majlis, represented a coalition of formidable political power. This was the alliance which produced, over the summer and autumn of 1923, the most sustained popular protest of the early 1920s, protest which provided an object lesson in both the power and the moral authority of the Tehran crowd. Occasioned by the expulsion of Shia *ulama* from the Iraqi holy cities by the British mandatory authorities, this protest was led by conservative clerical and bazaar elements, and was not intended to oppose or confront the government but rather to increase pressure on it to take strong action in defence of what the protesters defined as Iran's national and religious interests. Maintained over a protracted period, this popular movement, led by the *ulama* and the bazaar but in alliance with wider nationalist opinion, especially as represented in the Majlis and the secular press, was able to mount a concerted campaign using a variety of both modern and traditional tactics.

This prolonged campaign dramatically demonstrated the power of the Tehran crowd to assert itself and, under a clerical leadership with connections throughout the country, to provide a focus for national politics. It also showed the continuing salience of a repertoire of methods typical of past urban protests, including mass demonstrations, the closure of the bazaars, the taking of *bast*, the organization of boycotts, the collection of petitions, and the circulation of telegrams appealing for support between cities and to various authorities. The persistence of such methods, often traditional in form but modern in political content, and the readiness of wide layers of the population to adopt them, signalled the effectiveness of mass protest as a means of building up a dynamic for political action and providing for such action a degree of legitimacy. The campaign further illustrated the increasingly important role of the secular press in shaping public opinion. Although provoked by a specific and limited episode, the 1923 protests were deliberately presented as national protests, carried out by "the people" in the name of Iran and Islam, while the strength of popular feeling and the breadth of the mobilization gave the leadership the opportunity to pose broader issues and make wider and more general political demands.

#### THE TEHRAN CROWD AND THE REPUBLICAN MOVEMENT

In October 1923 Riza Khan made himself head of the government after successfully implicating a former prime minister and powerful rival, Qavam al-Saltanah (Ahmad Qavam), in a plot against his life and having him exiled, and in November the shah left for Europe.<sup>25</sup> Thus far in his rise

25. Cronin, *The Army*, pp. 153–154.

to power, Riza Khan had largely relied on his control of the army and the police in the capital. He had suppressed the early provincial challenges to his new regime with his new army, and had extended his rule throughout the provinces via the newly-established military authorities; he had overcome an early political crisis in the autumn of 1922 by a resignation manoeuvre, and he had engineered the downfall of Qavam in 1923 by intrigue.<sup>26</sup> Although he had been able to witness, on many occasions, popular protests in the capital, he had not yet himself sought directly to mobilize or manipulate the Tehran crowd. However, the fundamental changes which he now sought, after becoming prime minister and seeing the shah leave for Europe, possibly permanently, required some popular imprimatur. In the absence of any institutional or organized political support, a direct resort to the “people”, both in Tehran and in the provincial towns and cities, seemed a safer alternative to formal democratic engagement.

Riza Khan’s first major effort to generate mass support in Tehran for political change came with the republican movement in early 1924.<sup>27</sup> This movement provides a clear example of Riza Khan’s desire that the momentum for political and constitutional change should appear to emanate from the people, and this new populism led to his regime’s ready use of the Tehran crowd and its repeated attempts to manipulate popular politics. The republican agitation in the capital also illustrated the existence of politically and socially varying types of urban crowd; the crucial role played by the press in forming public opinion; and the intimate interaction between popular and elite politics, an interaction which found a sharp focus in the Majlis, both in its debates, in the leadership provided by different groups of deputies, and in the institution itself as the primary and legitimate locus for political decision-making.

It was the Tehran press which inaugurated the republican movement in Iran when, on 20 January 1924, a Tehran newspaper reproduced an article favouring the establishment of an Iranian republic from the Istanbul paper, *Vaqt*.<sup>28</sup> Sympathy for the concept of republicanism had been growing in Iran since the constitutional period and the actual behaviour of the present shah, Ahmad Shah, had given added strength to growing ideological predilections.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, when the *Vaqt* article was reproduced in

26. *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

27. Accounts of the republican movement may be found in, *inter alia*, Muhammad Taqi Bahar, Malik al-Shu’ara’, *Tarikh-i Mukhtasar-i Ahzab-i Siyasi-yi Iran* (Tehran, 1323), vol. 2; Yahya Dawlatabadi, *Tarikh-i ‘Asr-i Hazir va Hayat-i Yahya* (Tehran, 1337), vol. 4.

28. Havard, Diary of Events concerning the Republican Movement in Persia, Ovey to MacDonald, 1 April 1924, FO371/10145/E3743/455/34.

29. For the ideological background to republicanism see Touraj Atabaki, “The Caliphate, the Clerics and Republicanism in Turkey and Iran: Some Comparative Remarks”, in Touraj Atabaki and Erik Jan Zürcher (eds), *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London [etc.], 2004), pp. 44–64.

Tehran, it received a genuinely warm welcome both in the rest of the press and among much of the population. Public opinion then undoubtedly favoured the idea of a republic in Iran and hardly any voice was raised in defence of the now widely despised Ahmad Shah.<sup>30</sup>

After the publication of the *Vaqt* article, the press, both in Tehran and in the provinces, immediately took up the republican cause.<sup>31</sup> Riza Khan himself, however, when questioned by a journalist, refused to give an opinion on the issue. Although he was certainly discreetly encouraging the campaign, and those newspapers which he subsidized were among the most outspoken, "he preferred that it should wear the cloak of popular feeling",<sup>32</sup> wishing by his general attitude to create the impression that he was acquiescing in a movement which emanated from the people.<sup>33</sup> The prince regent<sup>34</sup> appealed to Riza Khan to exercise a restraining influence on the press, but Riza Khan, again appealing to the authority of the people, replied that he was unable to do so as the press was the expression of popular opinion.<sup>35</sup>

The press campaign had been an important prelude in preparing public opinion and in February an actual movement began to organize itself and a republican committee was formed in Tehran. Again republican activists were determined that the movement should have a popular character. The leader of the republican committee stated that their policy was to obtain telegrams from all the towns of Iran urging a change in the constitutional law in favour of a republic. When they were thus able to show that the whole of Iran demanded a republic, they would work through sympathizers in the Majlis to bring about a change in the constitution.<sup>36</sup>

Supporters of the republican movement, and especially the military authorities, also made strenuous efforts to organize popular protests in the provincial towns and especially the provincial capitals. A movement rapidly developed in the provinces, which complemented that in the capital, and which appeared to have real and considerable popular support.<sup>37</sup> In an ever-intensifying atmosphere, republican committees were formed in the provincial capitals, delegations arrived in Tehran from the nearer provinces, and telegrams began to pour in to Tehran from across the country demanding the abolition of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of a republic. During February and early March, meetings

30. IS no 8, 23 February 1924, FO371/10132/E3511/255/34.

31. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Annual Report, 1924, Loraine to Chamberlain, 22 May 1925, FO371/10848/E3401/3401/34.

34. While Ahmad Shah was absent in Europe, he was represented in Tehran by two of his brothers, both Qajar princes, the prince regent and the *valiabd* or crown prince.

35. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

36. IS no. 11, 15 March 1924, FO371/10132

37. Annual Report, 1924.

and demonstrations in favour of a republic continued to be held in mosques and other places of assembly in both Tehran and the provinces. In some places crowds gathered to take *bast* in the telegraph offices, stating that they would not leave until the Majlis granted their request for a republic; elsewhere the bazaars were closed in demonstration.<sup>38</sup>

During the first weeks of March, however, the first signs of opposition became visible on the streets and pro-republican public meetings in Tehran began to encounter hostility. The shah himself was now making some attempts to organize opposition to the republican movement through the Tehran clergy, and had established close contact with Khalisizadah, the prayer-leader of the Tehran bazaar, and the son of the most prominent cleric exiled from Iraq, Ayatullah Mahdi al-Khalisi. Nonetheless, up to mid-March, the opposition was not serious and people were still rallying to the republican idea, which had a real degree of popularity. The *ulama* themselves remained divided on the matter and incapable of decisive action.

The republican movement was now in the ascendant, its core made up of modernizing and leftist elements. It had its conservative and religious opponents but these were in a minority. However, as the movement gathered speed, a third tendency defined itself. This tendency, epitomized by the liberal independents in the Majlis, such as the President of the House, Mutamin al-Mulk (Husayn Pirnia), included those who sympathized with Riza Khan's nationalist and reforming agenda, and with the idea of a republic, but feared the implicit threat to constitutional rule.<sup>39</sup> As this tendency grew in strength, it too found more of a voice in the press.<sup>40</sup>

The *ultras* among the republican activists were eager to have the Majlis vote in favour of a republic before *nawruz*, the Iranian New Year, on 21 March. By tradition, on this holiday the shah appeared before the people in a *salam*. Although the shah was absent in Europe, the *salam* would still be held by the *valiahd* (the crown prince), and the republicans wished to avoid the dangerous symbolism of the people paying homage to a Qajar prince. But republican opinion was divided on this strategy. Fattan al-Saltanah, head of the Tehran republican committee, warned Riza Khan that opinion in the capital was not yet educated to the idea of a republic, and recommended an intensive campaign of preparation.<sup>41</sup> At first Riza Khan apparently did not wish to bring the matter to a head for another two

38. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

39. See Vanessa Martin, "Mudarris, Republicanism and the Rise to Power of Riza Khan, Sardar-i Sipah", in Stephanie Cronin (ed.) *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941* (London, 2003), pp. 65–77.

40. See, for example, the leading article in the Isfahan newspaper *Akhbar* of 25 February, which was reprinted in the *Mihan* of Tehran (tr.), IS no. 10, 8 March, 1924, FO371/10132/E3944/255/34.

41. IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

months, which period was to be spent in peaceful propaganda, but was persuaded by the other members of Fattan al-Saltanah's committee, and he decided to force through the change by *nawruz*.<sup>42</sup> This decision to resort to forcing the pace of change produced a radicalization in the movement, and crystallized the doubts of those who feared the constitutional implications of the change. The consequences of this attempt to accelerate the political process first became apparent in the Majlis.

The fifth Majlis had been opened by the prince regent on 11 February, with a clear majority of pro-republicans, many of whom had been helped to election by Riza Khan and the military authorities.<sup>43</sup> Riza Khan had also apparently tried to arrange for some extra-parliamentary pressure to be brought to bear on the deputies by secretly providing a sum of 3,000 *tumans* to pay some Tehran mullahs to arrange demonstrations against the shah at the Majlis when it began its proceedings.<sup>44</sup> The largest pro-republican faction was the *Tajaddud* (Revival), headed by the ex-cleric, Sayyid Muhammad Tadayyun, and supported by the socialists and the independents. Leading the opposition was the reformist party, led by Sayyid Hasan Mudarris, a conservative cleric whose political base lay in the bazaar networks of merchants, guilds, and lesser *ulama*.<sup>45</sup> Before the Majlis had even had time properly to examine the credentials of individual deputies, republican agitation was in full swing and Mudarris had adopted a strategy of systematically obstructing parliamentary procedure.

On 14 March, with opposition to the republic still muted and inchoate but visible in the streets, a Majlis session began in which each member's mandate had to be openly voted upon. Mudarris insisted on challenging the mandate of deputy after deputy, on the grounds that they had not been elected freely by the people, partly to try to reduce the number of Riza Khan's supporters but also to delay discussion of the republican issue until after *nawruz*. The increasingly heated debates finally, on 17 March, led to Tadayyun leading his supporters out of the House, where one of his party slapped Mudarris in the face. Mudarris immediately called on the crowd outside, who invaded the Majlis compound, and turmoil ensued until the police and military restored order. Tadayyun's party's chief object had been to bring about the proclamation of the republic as quickly as possible,

42. *Ibid.*

43. On elections in the Riza Shah period, see *Asnadi az Intikhabat-i Majlis-i Shura-yi Milli dar Dawrah-i Pahlavi-yi Avval* (Tehran, 1378).

44. IS no. 9, 1 March 1924, FO371/10132/E3512/255/34.

45. For the role played by Mudarris, see Martin, "Mudarris, Republicanism, and the Rise to Power of Riza Khan". There are several Persian sources for Mudarris. See, for example, H. Makki, *Mudarris Qabriman-i Azadi* (Tehran, 1358); A. Mudarrisi, *Mudarris* (Tehran, 1366); Ibrahim Khajah-Nuri, *Mudarris* (Tehran, 1357).



and before *nawruz*, but the physical assault on Mudarris upset many of his supporters and half of them subsequently left him.<sup>46</sup>

For two days there was no Majlis sitting, although the House finally reconvened. A tug-of-war then started, Tadayyun trying to rush through the remaining members' mandates in order to get to the business about the republic, and Mudarris still steadily opposing mandate after mandate in order to postpone any discussion of the republic till after 21 March. But after the assault on Mudarris, the conflict over the republic moved from the Majlis to the street. The "mobs in the lower quarters of the town"<sup>47</sup> took up the quarrel of Tadayyun and Mudarris and invaded the Majlis grounds in turn as each happened to be the stronger, and many scuffles took place there.

Both pro- and anti-republicans were now straining every nerve to demonstrate their public support and the popular mood in Tehran was volatile and shifting. On 15 and 16 March attempts were made to hold republican meetings in the Masjid-i Shah, but the meetings were a failure through interruptions by representatives of the merchants. Anti-republican meetings in the mosques were more successful. By 19 March the mobilization of the oppositional crowd, under the leadership of the *ulama*, was assuming much larger proportions, and included both those who were against the republic *per se*, but also many who simply disliked the methods employed by Tadayyun to rush the matter through the Majlis with the object of presenting the people with a *fait accompli* by the new year.<sup>48</sup> Although the anti-republican demonstrations had a religious foundation, and the speeches made were based on Islam, arguments were also increasingly being made to the effect that the existing Majlis did not possess the constitutional power to introduce a republic, and that a special assembly would have to be convened for that purpose, following a referendum on the matter.

The weakening of the pro-republicans' hold over the Tehran population was starkly illustrated on 19 March when an open-air pro-republican meeting in Tehran, for which elaborate stands had been built outside the city by military working parties, was poorly attended and ended in a fiasco. On the same day in the bazaar, a serious clash took place between pro- and anti-republican crowds. Partisans of the republic attempted to close the bazaars by force but the merchants resisted. Immense crowds came to the help of the *bazaris* and mauled the republicans severely, forcing them to take flight. The bazaar was intensely indignant at this incident. Crowds immediately gathered in the mosque, although the thoroughfares leading there were barred by the police, and those who

46. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

could not reach the mosque held prayer meetings in the open bazaar instead. Khalisizadah, the prayer-leader of the bazaar and a leader of the opposition to the republic, was sent to protest to the president of the Majlis.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, in the midst of the turmoil in the city, a sitting of the Majlis had opened at 4 pm, Riza Khan having apparently sent a demand to the president of the Majlis for the deputies' decision on the republican question by noon the following day, before *nawruz*. The disintegration of the Tajaddud faction, under the weight of Tadayyun's tactical mistakes and the intensity of popular opposition, meant that the pro-republicans were now unable to assemble a majority to defeat Mudarris. Many people entered the Majlis building to protest, and the proceedings degenerated into complete disorder, many of the deputies abandoning the session. Towards midnight, the military commandant of the Tehran garrison, with a detachment of troops from the Nadiri regiment, went to the Majlis to prevent unauthorized persons from entering and, according to one report, with orders from Riza Khan to prevent deputies leaving till the republican question was settled. The officers and men of the Nadiri regiment, however, had already participated in a meeting at which they had passed a resolution declaring that they would refuse to fight on behalf of the formation of a republic.<sup>50</sup> In a display of solidarity with the opposition, these soldiers refused to obey the orders of their commander, and allowed anti-republicans to enter the Majlis buildings. Large numbers of people were in the Majlis all night and no business could be done.<sup>51</sup>

Early the next morning, the Nadiri regiment having proved unreliable, Riza Khan sent cavalry from the Pahlavi regiment, one of the best regiments in the new army, and the police to clear the Majlis and prevent people entering. Nevertheless, at 11 am the crowd outside, numbering about 1,500 and led by mullahs, attacked the guards, broke into the grounds, and surrounded the Majlis, shouting against the republic. Rival mobs then had a pitched battle in the Majlis grounds, the anti-republicans winning the day and remaining in possession until evicted late in the afternoon by an armed force. Despite the rioting, an attempt was made to hold a sitting of the Majlis in the morning. It seems that a resolution was passed to the effect that the Majlis had not the power to alter the constitution without a referendum to the people, by fifty-two votes to twenty-four, but owing to the disorder the validity of the sitting was questioned.<sup>52</sup> The Majlis was then adjourned till 22 March, the day after *nawruz*. The square outside the Majlis was finally cleared by police about 5

49. *Ibid.*; IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

50. Cronin, *The Army*, p. 160; IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

51. IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

52. *Ibid.*

pm, but the crowd within the grounds did not leave till 7.30 pm, when about 3,000 people, led by mullahs, came out and moved through the streets, tearing down republican flags and symbols. At a huge public meeting, clerical speakers demanded political freedom and personal safety, the release of those arrested, and the election of a constituent assembly to decide on the question of a republic.

The Tehran streets remained alive with the conflict over the *nawruz* holiday of 21 March. The next day, 22 March, the Majlis resumed its place at the centre of the conflict. The deputies were scheduled to meet in open session to discuss the proposal for a change in the fundamental laws of the constitution and the establishment of a republic. However, the sitting never began. Tehran was extremely tense, and the deputies had received news that large anti-republican crowds were gathering in the bazaars to make a demonstration at the Majlis. In due course, shortly before 4 pm, a crowd numbering well over 5,000 people marched towards the Majlis, broke through the police cordon around the Majlis square, hammered at the doors of the Majlis, which had been closed, and demanded admittance to the grounds. The doors were opened after some hesitation, and the crowd rushed in, filling the grounds and bearing banners inscribed with anti-republican slogans. Anti-republican speeches were made in the grounds, including by some of the deputies themselves, and the Majlis was called upon to allow no change in the fundamental laws of the constitution, at least until the previous consent of the people had been obtained. The crowd was perfectly orderly, the greater part of them squatting down on the floor, in peaceable possession of the grounds.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile another large crowd had gathered in the Masjid-i Shah and neighbourhood to await events in the Majlis. From numbering about 3,000 at 3 pm, it grew to about 10,000 and signatures were collected for a petition against the republic.<sup>54</sup>

At 5 pm, two companies of the Pahlavi regiment arrived in the Majlis square, and fifteen minutes later Riza Khan drove up in a carriage and tried to drive into the Majlis. He was unable to do so, as the crowd was too dense. Very angry, he left his carriage and gave the order for the two companies of soldiers to march into the Majlis grounds. They forced their way in and lined up in the centre. As Riza Khan entered there was some shouting, and he made his way through to the entrance of the building with great difficulty. After waving his arms in the air several times as a sign to the crowd to make way, he ordered the soldiers to clear the grounds. The crowd now began to become angry and missiles were thrown, one of which seems to have struck Riza Khan. The military, armed with bayonets, proceeded to evict the demonstrators with the use of considerable violence

53. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

54. IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

and several people were wounded, some falling underneath a wall which collapsed under the pressure of the crowd. Many people were arrested, including Khalisizadah, and the arrested men were taken to the nearest police station and detained there.<sup>55</sup>

Although the troops succeeded in clearing the Majlis grounds, this episode in fact signalled the political collapse of the republican movement. The deputies and the population in general were furious at the action of the army, especially since the Majlis had become customarily accepted as a place of *bast*. Immediately upon Riza Khan entering the Majlis, he was berated by the president, Mutamin al-Mulk, who even threatened to call the deputies into session to denounce his action. Had he done so, there would certainly have been a vote of no confidence in Riza Khan.<sup>56</sup> The deputies then demanded the release of those arrested. Riza Khan acquiesced, the detainees were freed, and Mutamin al-Mulk apologized to them on behalf of the Majlis. Riza Khan, under intense pressure, agreed to abandon his republican project and, a little later, a sitting of the Majlis was held at which it was decided that the constitution must be upheld, and there could be no question of a republic.<sup>57</sup> On 1 April Riza Khan issued a proclamation in which he called for republicanism to be dropped, in deference to public opinion, and for all patriots to unite and work for the preservation of the greatness of Islam and the independence of Iran.<sup>58</sup>

From the beginning, the republican movement, although encouraged and organized by Riza Khan's military and civilian supporters, had nonetheless struck a chord among much of the population. It had found especial favour with the intelligentsia but a general desire to rid the country of Ahmad Shah was widespread throughout the country. It was this genuinely popular dimension of the republican movement which allowed Riza Khan to present the proposed constitutional change as the authentic expression of the wishes of the people.

Up till 17 March, popular dislike of Ahmad Shah was the preponderant mood, and public opinion, especially as represented in the press, was broadly favourable towards the idea of a republic. The *ulama* were divided and largely silent, opposition muted and confined to a few individual clerics, and their supporters in the bazaar indifferent. Mudarris alone had been vocal in opposition in the Majlis. Around that date, however, a complete revulsion of public feeling took place. The republican camp's decision to force the change through by *nawruz* created unease, while the assault on Mudarris caused outrage among both deputies and the public.

55. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

56. *Ibid.*

57. IS no. 12, 22 March 1924, FO371/10132/E4131/255/34.

58. Prime Minister's Proclamation, from *Sitarah-i Iran*, 1 April 1924, (tr.) FO 416/74.

The Tajaddud faction split up after the Mudarris incident, and this was in itself a great blow to the republican movement.

The press had also started to confuse the republic with religion, awakening fears that a republic would damage Islam, while news of the abolition of the caliphate by the republican authorities in Turkey had reached Tehran in early March and formed a background for growing religious anxiety. The pro-republicans made a serious tactical mistake when they tried to close the bazaars on 20 March, the day before *nawruz*, just at a time when merchants most expected to do good business, and the successful resistance to this attempt gave the anti-republican crowd a taste of its own strength. Even the prince regent managed to play a role helpful to his partisans. Although he was visited by deputations of notables and deputies who advised him to leave, and even hinted that his life might be in danger, he remained in his palace, thus providing the anti-republicans with an important rallying point, of which they took good advantage.

As opposition increased, the conflict took on a religious aspect and the Tehran clergy came out into the open as the leaders of the anti-republican movement. The slogans used by the anti-republicans brought the silent and half-hearted to their side, and the result was the development of a solid feeling amongst the masses of Tehran against a republican form of government.<sup>59</sup> Riza Khan's use of the army against the peaceful demonstrators in the Majlis on 22 March was another turning point, his inability to retrieve the situation by any method other than armed force causing him to lose what remained of his support and his prestige.

The fifth Majlis had opened with a solid republican majority. Had the deputies not been overawed by the vehemence of the anti-republican demonstrations in the capital, it is likely that they would have fulfilled Riza Khan's expectations and brought about the proposed constitutional change.<sup>60</sup> In the face of an overwhelmingly and actively hostile population, however, the majority changed their minds and retreated, taking refuge behind the fundamental law.<sup>61</sup> Under intense popular pressure, the deputies accepted the view of the Tehran crowd that they were in fact debarred from tampering with the constitution, as they had not been elected especially for that purpose, and only a specially convened constituent assembly had the power to introduce a republic.

The ignominious collapse of the republican movement gravely damaged Riza Khan's prestige and weakened his overall position in the Majlis, among the general population, and even in the army.<sup>62</sup> Over the following months he was obliged to engage in a protracted and complex struggle,

59. Havard, *Diary of Events*.

60. Annual Report, 1924.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Cronin, *The Army*, pp. 162–163; 193–195.

with both popular and elite opposition, before he succeeded, through the introduction of martial law in Tehran, in restoring his pre-eminence.

#### THE TEHRAN CROWD AND MARTIAL LAW

Although Riza Khan had formally abandoned republicanism, he remained in a political deadlock with his opponents. As he could now count on only about thirty votes in the Majlis, and his ability to appeal directly to popular support in the capital had severely diminished, he decided to revert to the tactic of direct military intimidation. On 7 April he resigned and left Tehran for the country. The next day, 8 April, the Majlis received telegrams from all the provincial army commanders, some expressing regret at Riza Khan's withdrawal and requesting the Majlis to bring him back, others more menacing.<sup>63</sup> This resignation tactic was successful. The shocked deputies, under pressure from the Tajaddud and socialist members, immediately passed a vote of confidence in Riza Khan and sent a deputation which successfully persuaded him to return and resume all his posts.

Although his army had cowed the Majlis, Riza Khan's position was still precarious, and his enemies were determined to use the opportunity presented by the failure of republicanism to bring him down completely. His own closest supporters were, furthermore, disconcerted by the speed at which the republican movement had been abandoned and confused about the direction events were taking.<sup>64</sup> Over the next few months the political situation in Tehran definitely seemed to be crystallizing in favour of the shah, even though he was still in Europe. In the capital, the decisive political arena, Riza Khan faced both parliamentary and popular hostility.

Although the deputies had been intimidated by the threats of the army commanders, many remained resentful and angry, and were vocal in their criticisms in the Majlis of both the senior officers' actions and of Riza Khan's new cabinet, introduced after his reinstatement. The streets of the capital were also still firmly under the control of Riza Khan's enemies. By June, a considerable popular agitation had developed in Tehran for the return of the shah.<sup>65</sup> Although Ahmad Shah inspired little or no personal affection or respect, the opposition were anxious for his return, as they hoped his constitutional position would act both as a rallying point for their own forces and as a barrier to Riza Khan. A group of forty *ulama* telegraphed the shah, inviting him to return, and they seemed to have the

63. *Ibid.*, pp. 161; 194; Ahmad Amirahmadi, *Khatirat-i Nakhustin Sipahdud-i Iran* (Tehran, 1373), pp. 231–233.

64. For the reluctance of the republican camp to drop the campaign, see, for example, articles in the Tehran newspaper, *Shafaq-i Surkh*, from 6 April.

65. IS no. 25, 21 June 1924, FO371/10132/E6279/255/34.

backing of public opinion. The press reflected the changed mood, largely refraining from its former vituperation of the shah. Public criticism of Riza Khan, on the other hand, was becoming bolder and more outspoken, and it had actually become more dangerous to speak publicly in his favour than in favour of the shah.<sup>66</sup> By early July the demand for Riza Khan's resignation from the premiership showed no signs of weakening, press criticism continued unabated, and he seemed in danger of eclipse.

Riza Khan had been trying since April to conciliate his opponents, using a range of political and financial inducements to regain both elite and popular support. He particularly needed to establish control of both the press and the street. For those not amenable to his conciliatory tactics, however, other methods were available. On 3 July, as the political crisis showed no signs of diminishing, Tehran was plunged into uproar by the murder by two police agents of Muhammad Riza (Mirzadah) Ishqi, the famous nationalist poet and editor of the newspaper, *Qarn-i Bistun*. Ishqi had supported Mudarris over the republic and his newspaper had since become highly critical of the regime.<sup>67</sup> The murder gave rise to a widespread fear of the inauguration of a campaign of terror against critics of the regime, and the editors of hostile newspapers took sanctuary in the Majlis.<sup>68</sup> Ishqi's funeral was itself the occasion of another mass protest against the regime. At a time when Tehran had only about 150,000 inhabitants, it attracted 30,000 mourners, and speeches were made at which Riza Khan was denounced as a murderer, assassin, and the oppressor of the people.<sup>69</sup>

The tension and ferment which had been caused by Ishqi's murder continued unabated for several days until it was drowned, or perhaps channelled into, an outbreak of hostility towards the Bahai community.<sup>70</sup> The stimulation of anti-Bahai feeling had been greatly helped by rumours of two supposed miracles. In one case a Bahai, who allegedly refused alms with some derogatory remarks about Islam, was blinded; in the other a pious Muslim was said to have recovered his sight by the aid of the water of a wayside fountain. News of both miracles spread like wildfire, and the fountain acquired great fame and was visited every day by hundreds of people who had various ailments and hoped for a cure. Hostility towards the Bahais grew apace, and for some days those suspected of being Bahais were insulted and stoned in the streets, some Bahai shopkeepers had their shops looted, and demonstrations were made outside the houses of

66. *Ibid.*

67. Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran*, p. 288. See also M. Qa'id, *Ishqi* (Tehran, 1998).

68. IS no. 27, 5 July 1924, FO371/10132/E6700/255/34.

69. Michael P. Zirinsky, "Blood, Power and Hypocrisy: The Murder of Robert Imbrie and American Relations with Pahlavi Iran, 1924", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 18 (1986), p. 282.

70. IS no. 28, 12 July 1924, FO371/10132/E6706/255/34.

prominent Bahais.<sup>71</sup> The anti-Bahai agitation was accompanied by a marked growth of popular hostility towards foreigners. It was generally believed in Tehran that the anti-Bahai agitation had a political origin, specifically that it had been instigated by Riza Khan himself to distract public attention from the murder of Ishqi.<sup>72</sup> This was indeed the view of the US vice-consul in Tehran, Major Robert Imbrie, who personally observed the rioting.

Major Imbrie's interest in the conflict was intense. On 18 July, accompanied by another American, Melvin Seymour, he drove in a cab to the miraculous fountain in order to photograph the scene. The taking of photographs immediately angered the crowd, a section of which, at the instigation of a young mullah, took up the cry that the Americans were Bahais who had poisoned the water in the fountain. The crowd first severely beat Imbrie and his companion, then followed them into the hospital where they were taken by the police, murdering Imbrie while he was lying on the operating table.<sup>73</sup>

Whether this mob attack on Imbrie was actually organized by the regime, and if so whether Imbrie's murder was fully intended or a consequence of events spinning out of control, or whether Riza Khan merely took advantage of the opportunity the murder provided, cannot be resolved definitively. Certainly it later transpired that the police had been under orders not to interfere in anti-Bahai disturbances, and neither the police nor the military present at the assaults did anything to prevent them; indeed, some of the military participated in the attack.<sup>74</sup> But what is clear is that the episode gave Riza Khan the perfect pretext to regain the political initiative. He immediately declared martial law, imposed military censorship on the press, and carried out mass arrests of his political opponents, particularly any, such as Khalisizadeh and leaders of the city quarters, who had prestige and influence with the Tehran crowd.<sup>75</sup> In all, about 300 of his most outspoken critics were jailed and some were deported from Tehran.

One of the main provisions of the martial-law regulations was aimed at preventing free public assembly, and the imposition of martial law in the capital allowed Riza Khan to suppress those popular urban elements which had been inclined to oppose the regime's agenda. Their leaders, those to whom they looked to give authentic voice to their grievances, clerics such as Khalisizadah and newspaper editors such as Ishqi, were silenced, either through arrest or murder. His control over the Tehran street established,

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. Ovey to MacDonald, 2 August 1924, FO371/10156/E7108/6215/34; Annual Report, 1924; Zirinsky, "Blood, Power and Hypocrisy", pp. 275–276.

74. Ovey to MacDonald, 2 August 1924, FO371/10156/E7108/6215/34.

75. IS no. 30, 26 July 1924, FO371/10132/E7104/255/34.



Riza Khan was able from now on freely to mobilize a friendly crowd without fear that, as had happened during the republican agitation, this crowd would be overwhelmed by its opposite number.

Although martial law had silenced the press and the Tehran streets, opposition continued in the Majlis. The imposition of martial law itself had been strongly opposed by the deputies, who had not been consulted prior to its declaration.<sup>76</sup> Parliamentary critics of the government were still led by Mudarris, who particularly attacked martial law as contrary to the constitution. With his supporters, Mudarris decided to make another attempt to dislodge Riza Khan and announced he would present an interpellation<sup>77</sup> in the Majlis on 19 August. However Mudarris quickly realized that he had no real chance of mustering a majority against Riza Khan and he tried to withdraw the scheduled interpellation.<sup>78</sup> But Riza Khan, grasping the opportunity to deal his enemies in the Majlis as crushing a blow as he had dealt those on the streets, decided to insist on a vote on the interpellation on the date set. He wished to demonstrate clearly his parliamentary ascendancy, but he was also determined to stage a dramatic intimidation of any remaining parliamentary opposition by a populist *coup de théâtre*.

Early on the morning of the 19th, at about 7 am, a large crowd of about 4,000 people assembled round the Majlis, although only a limited number were permitted by the soldiers on guard to enter the Majlis grounds. At 8 am Riza Khan arrived in his car. The crowds shouted to him that they were not allowed to enter, but, as if bowing to popular demand, he gave orders that they should be permitted to do so. It was immediately obvious that the crowd, which began to shout slogans in favour of Riza Khan and against Mudarris, consisted of supporters of Riza Khan, and that this demonstration had been orchestrated beforehand.<sup>79</sup>

Inside the Majlis there were also well-organized displays of support for the government. These displays, however, rapidly degenerated into disorder and threatened to get out of hand. One disturbance after another erupted, and at one point Riza Khan made a show of personally intervening in order to save Mudarris from a violent attack. These scenes continued unabated, and at 12.30 the House decided to adjourn till later in the afternoon. Riza Khan left the Majlis, amid the applause of the crowd outside, some of whom threw flowers at him. Mudarris left on foot, but he and a few of his supporters were immediately set upon by gangs of roughs

76. *Ibid.*

77. An interruption to proceedings to demand an explanation from a minister. In this case Mudarris hoped to provoke a vote of no confidence in Riza Khan.

78. IS no. 34, 23 August 1924, FO371/10132/E7941/255/34.

79. Ovey to MacDonald, 20 August 1924, FO371/10146/E7936/455/34.

among the crowd. He was eventually rescued by the police only after receiving sufficient injuries to confine him to bed.<sup>80</sup>

When the Majlis reassembled at 5.30 in the afternoon the whole of the opposition was absent, whether as a deliberate protest or as the direct result of intimidation is unclear. Riza Khan was determined to press his advantage. He refused the Speaker's suggestion that the interpellation lapse, as there was no one present to move it, and demanded a vote of confidence. In the absence of those opposition members who had demanded a secret ballot, the vote was taken openly and the ninety-one members present unanimously recorded their confidence in Riza Khan.<sup>81</sup>

The murder of Major Imbrie and the subsequent imposition of martial law and military censorship was a key turning point in Riza Khan's post-republican fortunes. From this time on, the press ceased to play any significant oppositional role and no longer gave voice or shape to popular grievances. These grievances were increasingly driven underground, emerging only through the secret circulation of anonymous *shabnamahs*. The Majlis too, especially after the interpellation fiasco, succumbed to intimidation and became more disciplined and docile, a tool of the regime rather than a sounding board and mould of public opinion. Martial law remained in force in Tehran for the duration of the final contest between Riza Khan and the Qajars. However, even after its lifting in early 1926, neither the press nor the Majlis were capable of asserting their former independence.

#### THE TEHRAN CROWD AND THE OVERTHROW OF THE QAJARS

Although Riza Khan had publicly abandoned the republican movement, his determination to get rid of Ahmad Shah was undiminished, and the year 1925 was dominated by his struggle with the Qajars. His peaceful victory over the Shaykh of Muhammarah and his restoration to full Iranian sovereignty of the oil-rich province of Khuzistan at the end of 1924 delighted nationalist opinion and provided another opportunity for his supporters to stage-manage shows of public support. It seems that a plan was even devised to have Riza Khan taken to the palace and declared shah by popular acclaim, although Riza Khan himself believed this plan ill-advised and premature and scotched it.<sup>82</sup>

Having rejected the idea of using the groundswell of support for his Khuzistan success to propel himself on to the throne, nonetheless Riza Khan did indeed soon play the populist card against the Majlis. Some three

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. Annual Report, 1925, Loraine to Chamberlain, 8 April 1926, FO371/11500/E2635/2635/34.

weeks after his return, he openly renewed his campaign against Ahmad Shah by demanding that the Majlis recognize him as commander-in-chief of the army, a position which constitutionally belonged to the shah. If the deputies failed to reach a decision, he would, he threatened, appeal over their heads directly to the people. The deputies, fearful and weakened by years of relentless intimidation, agreed to recognize his special claims to command of the armed forces, and made him constitutionally answerable only to the Majlis, no longer to the shah.<sup>83</sup>

Riza Khan was now determined to force the issue with the shah. The dynasty's remaining supporters were desperate for the shah to return, while public opinion, already disillusioned with the Qajars, became increasingly exasperated. The crisis began to come to a head when the shah, on 16 September, telegraphed his intention to return to Iran and to sail from Marseilles on 2 October. This completely unexpected announcement created a sensation in Tehran. Its meaning was feverishly discussed, but public opinion was baffled as to the shah's real intentions. In the midst of the furor caused by the news of the shah's decision to return, Tehran was convulsed by large-scale bread riots.

In times both of actual shortage of staple foods, especially bread, and of fear of shortage, food riots were common and the authorities were everywhere extremely sensitive to popular feeling on this issue. However, it was in the capital that the consequences of bread shortages were potentially most dangerous for the authorities and, by September, anxiety and fear about winter supplies were affecting the Tehran population deeply, especially the poorer classes. In 1925 the harvest had failed catastrophically, especially in the neighbourhood of Tehran, owing to drought and locusts. Although warnings had been given much earlier in the year that there would be shortages, it was only in September that the scale of the disaster became generally known. The capital had immediately become tense. The cereal supply of the city totalled, when reduction had been made for seed, only 1,000 *kharvars* to meet a normal consumption of 80,000 *kharvars*.<sup>84</sup> The surrounding areas could be of no help to the capital as the nearby towns were in a grave situation themselves. The memory of the terrible famine of 1918 was still very much alive and Tehran was now faced with a potentially even greater disaster.

By the latter part of September the wheat situation was really critical. From Sunday 20 September the government grain department, on official instructions, issued less wheat than usual to the bakers, and on that day and the three following days the bread put on sale was of bad quality and shortages occurred. These shortages heightened feelings of alarm in the city. The bread question had been the subject of several recent debates in

83. Cronin, *The Army*, pp. 196–197.

84. Annual Report, 1925. One *kharvar* is equal to 297 kilos.

the Majlis, and it was well known among the people that the government grain stock was low. On the morning of 23 September, after three days of shortages, a crowd collected in the bazaar and decided to congregate in the Sipahsalar Mosque. Here, they were addressed by the military governor of Tehran, General Murtaza Khan Yazdanpanah, who tried to persuade them to disperse by assuring them that their complaints would be remedied at once. The crowd, estimated at several thousands and clamouring for bread, was unconvinced, and decided to go to the Majlis to ask that some effective steps be taken to put the matter right before the arrival of winter worsened the situation further.<sup>85</sup>

Up to this point, the movement was a simple demonstration on the part of people who were acutely anxious about their winter supplies of food, and who believed that the shortage of supplies was simply and solely occasioned by a lack of grain. Now, however, the original crowd in the mosque was joined by far greater numbers, and speakers began to raise wider political objectives. The intention of the recent arrivals was made clear when a Majlis deputy, who had been prominent in the republican movement, made a speech telling the crowd that the government would make bread abundant if only they would proclaim that they did not wish for the present shah to be their ruler any more. This apparently angered the crowd, and the deputy was forced to flee to avoid being violently attacked.<sup>86</sup>

From then on, the situation deteriorated into chaos. Thugs began to force the merchants in the bazaar to close up their shops under threats of various kinds, and there were demonstrations for and against the shah, and for and against the government. One crowd broke into the Majlis buildings, assaulted some of the deputies, and did considerable damage, cheering the name of the shah and showing hostility to the government. Troops were called out, but the crowd dispersed without coming into conflict with them, having been mollified when the deputies in the Majlis promised them they would take effective steps to provide food for the people. In a gesture to public opinion, Riza Khan himself ordered a considerable amount of army transport to be sent out to fetch in grain which was already on its way to the capital.

A remarkable feature of the riots was the role played by women. More than half the crowd was composed of women. It was they who invaded the Majlis session room where they put on a theatrical parody of a parliamentary sitting, and broke many chairs and glass chandeliers. Although the main body of the crowd dispersed, a number of these women remained in *bast* in the Majlis enclosure, although during the night

85. Loraine to Chamberlain, 29 September 1925, FO371/10849/E6722/5808/34. A brief account of the disturbances may also be found in Bahar, *Tarikh-i Mukhtasar*, pp. 276–277.

86. Loraine to Chamberlain, 29 September 1925, FO371/10849/E6722/5808/34.

they were forcibly removed to the police station.<sup>87</sup> On the next day, Thursday, 24 September, there was plenty of bread in all the shops. The bazaars, however, remained closed, and from early in the morning large crowds gathered, drawn especially from the poorest quarters of the town. As on the previous day, women again played a prominent role. They were in the forefront of the crowds with their veils tied round their waists and brandishing sticks and other implements.<sup>88</sup>

The crowds were agitated by a number of rumours. These were principally to the effect that the government and its alleged sponsors, the British, were responsible for the shortages, and specifically that the government had taken no adequate steps to provide the people with bread; that the Russians had offered wheat, but that the Iranian government had refused; that the British would not allow the Iranian government to accept the Russian offers; that there was bread to be had in the Soviet legation, and that the people should go there to take *bast*; that some protest must be made against the outrageous action of the police in arresting Muslim women. These rumours contributed towards raising the temperature of the crowd which became very angry.

One group began to march up towards the Majlis, whilst another large crowd made its way towards the Soviet legation. The crowd that marched towards the Majlis quickly drove back the police with stones and sticks, and only the arrival of soldiers saved the building from being sacked. The police had received orders not to treat the crowd too roughly, but when the crowd had inflicted injuries on many of the police and seemed in real earnest, the military were ordered to fire over the heads of the people, and even then hardly succeeded in stemming the rush. Little by little, however, the crowd was driven off and dispersed, and with the arrival of reinforcements, the army regained control of the situation.<sup>89</sup>

Meanwhile, the crowd going towards the Soviet legation, about 5,000 strong, had also had an encounter with the police and military, and though the main body had been driven back, individuals had succeeded in penetrating the legation garden, and by the evening there were around 120 people in *bast* there, loudly demanding the return of the shah. The Iranian government immediately asked the Soviet minister to evict the *bastis* but the minister replied that he was unable to act against the ancient custom of according refuge to those seeking it. The government then placed military posts closely around the legation in order to arrest the *bastis* when they themselves decided to leave. The next day, Friday, the city was quiet and on Saturday the bazaars opened as usual and, except for some patrols of

87. *Ibid.* The role of women is confirmed by Bahar, who states that the majority of the crowd was made up of women and children; Bahar, *Tarikh-i Mukhtasar*, p. 276.

88. Loraine to Chamberlain, 29 September 1925, FO371/10849/E6722/5808/34.

89. *Ibid.*

military in various quarters of the town, the disturbances appeared to be over. On Sunday the *bastis* began to leave the Soviet legation but were immediately arrested. By the next day the legation too was quiet.

Although the bread shortage had been acute, and the population of the city genuinely deeply concerned at the real prospect of famine, it seems clear that the riots themselves had been deliberately provoked by Riza Khan to work up an anti-shah demonstration and to frighten the shah into abandoning his recently announced plan to return to Iran.<sup>90</sup> Riza Khan seems to have calculated that he could manipulate the popular anxiety over bread to start a general anti-shah movement in the capital. The government apparently deliberately ordered that the bread supply should be curtailed in order to heighten popular anxiety, and its own agents then encouraged people to gather in crowds, and to close the bazaars, for the purpose of a demonstration. These agents then tried to direct the demonstrations into channels suitable to Riza Khan's purpose and turn a protest against the shortage of bread into an anti-shah demonstration. But the crowd refused to be led into any expression of anti-shah sentiment; on the contrary, the shah had rarely received as much approbation as he did during these riots, while it was Riza Khan who came in for abuse. Riza Khan's agents then completely lost control of the crowd, which appears to have reacted to the instigation of other political tendencies, leftist but especially royalist, which had also been active among them.<sup>91</sup>

Riza Khan had made money freely available beforehand to buy support for an anti-shah demonstration but apparently the funds were embezzled, and in consequence the ground was not well prepared. The plans then miscarried badly, and the demonstration turned against the organizers and assumed a violent anti-government and pro-shah complexion. The attitude of the crowd annoyed and alarmed Riza Khan and the government was then forced to take drastic steps to quell the disturbances. Riza Khan appears to have taken fright after the first day's events, and ensured that there was plenty of bread available by the second day, but matters had already moved beyond his control. Indeed, for the rest of that winter, although the grain situation in Tehran remained critical, the government took every precaution to alleviate popular anxiety and prevent further disturbances. The military authorities, for example, scoured the villages of Azarbaijan for grain to transport to the capital while the government spent large amounts of money to hold the price stable.<sup>92</sup>

The bread riots had intervened before the shah's date of sailing and 2 October passed without the shah using the passage he had booked. On

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

92. For an account of the magnitude of the disastrous crop failures, see the section on the famine crisis, Annual Report, 1925.

4 October the bazaars in Tabriz were closed as a protest against the shah's return. Tents were pitched in the compound of the telegraph office in a *bast* and a stream of messages and petitions was sent to the capital. This agitation against the shah and the whole Qajar dynasty, which had begun in Tabriz, then spread rapidly to many other provincial cities. It seems that Riza Khan, when letting loose the disorders in Tehran on 23 September, had contemplated an anti-shah movement starting in the capital and spreading to the provinces but, his provocation backfiring, decided to reverse the process and make the movement start in the provinces and converge on the capital.<sup>93</sup>

The republican movement had been particularly strong in Tabriz and now a very active anti-shah campaign was quickly reignited. A committee of national awakening was formed which, although it received definite encouragement from the military authorities, contained representatives from all sections of the population of the city and reflected an authentic current of opinion. The Tabrizis, consciously recalling their struggle against the royalist forces of Muhammad Ali Shah during the constitutional wars, now actively assumed the leadership of the anti-Qajar movement.<sup>94</sup> In response to appeals from Tabriz, committees similar to its own sprang up in many provincial cities and towns, and each swore to follow the lead that Tabriz had given. The Majlis was bombarded with telegrams from all over the country demanding the dethronement of the shah.

These tactics were successful. The anti-Qajar movement spread rapidly, and the impression soon appeared of an irresistible demand throughout the country for the removal of the Qajars and their replacement by a Pahlavi dynasty. Although the Tabriz committee represented an authentic popular movement, elsewhere a great deal of skilful engineering by Riza Khan's civilian, and especially his military, supporters had gone into creating this impression. Nonetheless, contempt for Ahmad Shah was such that the desire on the part of public opinion for the removal of the Qajars was largely genuine, although artificial regarding the installation of a Pahlavi dynasty, except insofar as the maintenance of some form of monarchy corresponded with the general desire to remain within the constitutional framework.<sup>95</sup>

Tehran, however, remained aloof. There were some efforts to mobilize the capital's population against the shah but these met with little success. With local leaders arrested, the press silenced, and martial law still in force, there was also little overt protest. Meanwhile, the provinces, with Tabriz in the lead, were bitterly complaining of the inaction of the Majlis in dealing

93. Annual Report, 1925.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

with the situation, and of its inattention to the demand for the removal of the Qajars. Messages from the Tabriz committee of national awakening to Tehran were gradually becoming more threatening and finally, on 28 October, professing exasperation at the inaction of the Majlis and its failure to comply with the wishes of the nation, the committee sent an ultimatum to Tehran, announcing that it intended to sever connections with the capital and raise an army of volunteers to march on Tehran and punish the cowardly deputies who refused to listen to the people.

Although the Tehran population itself was quiet, the Tabrizi movement was reinforced in Tehran in several ways. On 28 October and subsequent days, Azarbayjanis resident in Tehran took *bast* with Riza Khan as a protest against the inaction of the Majlis in what they called the “national crisis”. By the evening of the 30th, this movement, which was headed by some influential merchants, had reached considerable proportions.<sup>96</sup> On the evening of the 29th, while the Majlis was discussing the political situation, shots rang out in an assassination attempt, organized by the Chief of Police, on the opposition deputy, Muhammad Taqi Bahar.<sup>97</sup> This incident was intended to terrorize any remaining critics and indeed all the deputies, who feared the regime’s resort to open and systematic violence, immediately fled the Majlis.<sup>98</sup>

On 31 October the Majlis, in fear of the regime and under intense pressure from the provincial agitation, voted for the abolition of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of a provisional government with Riza Khan at its head, pending the decisions of a constituent assembly. Riza Khan appears to have learnt well the lesson of the republican fiasco and there was, on this occasion, no attempt to railroad constitutional change through the Majlis. Rather, the constitutional niceties were fully observed with the call for the convening of a constituent assembly to make the necessary decisions. The docility of the deputies had further been ensured by Riza Khan’s preparations in cultivating individual politicians, and he had also, earlier in the year, neutralized certain of the most prominent right-wing defenders of the Qajar dynasty in the Majlis by taking them into the cabinet.<sup>99</sup> The deputies, facing no popular anger nor mass protests in Tehran of the kind that had persuaded them to abandon the republic, but only intense and even threatening anti-Qajar demands from the provinces, especially Azarbayjan, now voted obediently, and almost unanimously, as the regime required.<sup>100</sup>

96. IS no. 27, 31 October 1925, FO371/10842/E7216/82/34.

97. Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran*, p. 298.

98. IS no. 27, 31 October 1925, FO371/10842/E7216/82/34.

99. For a discussion of the alignments within the Majlis, see Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran*, pp. 294–299; for the significance of the reconstruction of the cabinet, see Annual Report, 1925.

100. Eighty deputies voted in favour, eighty-five being present.



The role played by the Tabrizis had indeed been pivotal and they were overjoyed at their success, believing themselves to have recovered their former position as the leaders of progressive public opinion in Iran.<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere, despite the popular clamour which had apparently preceded the decision, the news of the Majlis decision was received calmly and with acquiescence though mostly also without enthusiasm. In Tehran, however, the population, although denied the streets, made its feelings clear in the elections to the Majlis the following year when they refused to return a single deputy who had voted for the change of dynasty.<sup>102</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In the first years after the coup of 1921, the Tehran crowd was an active political force in the life of the capital, popular protests taking place over myriad minor and local grievances as well as over issues of wider nationalist and religious significance. But it was in the political and constitutional battles of 1924–1925 that the Tehran crowd became a factor of central and sometimes decisive importance. The struggle over republicanism, for example, was decided not in the Majlis, nor in the *madrasahs* of Qum, but on the streets of the capital. Although it was the Majlis deputies who actually took the decision not to introduce the change, they did so only because the pressure from below was stronger than the pressure from above. The actual political victory belonged to the anti-republican Tehran crowd, led by Mudarris and acting in defence of the constitution.

It was again crowd action, but this time probably stimulated by the regime, which led to the murder of Imbrie and created the political conditions which enabled Riza Khan to declare martial law and thus finally to crush his critics' ability themselves to use the weapon of popular protest. The bread riots of 1925 proved to Riza Khan the necessity of going beyond Tehran to use provincial crowds, especially that in Tabriz, to force the capital, both the population and the national political institutions, to accept the change of dynasty.

In the first half of the 1920s both the regime and its opponents repeatedly invoked the Tehran "street" and attempted to force through, or resist, political and constitutional changes on the back of popular disturbances. Riza Khan, relying on the army and a certain amount of elite support, with the occasional resort to intimidation, at first largely eschewed direct populist appeals. In 1924–1925, however, he and his supporters in the capital, imitated by the military authorities in the

101. Annual Report, 1925.

102. Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran*, p. 298.

provinces, repeatedly attempted to produce and utilized popular disturbances to provide an appearance of legitimacy for their actions, to intimidate opponents, and to force through legislation of doubtful popularity.

Although, in the first years of his power, Riza Khan had neither sought to mobilize the urban crowd nor experienced its power when pitted against him, yet he had frequently had occasion to observe its political power and especially its value in conferring a degree of popular legitimacy. In 1924–1925, during the mortal struggle inaugurated by the republican movement and culminating in the change of dynasty, Riza Khan translated the lessons drawn from this early experience into a new strategy. In these years a populist dimension to Riza Khan's methods may clearly be discerned. While strangling democratic institutions, intimidating the Majlis, frustrating parliamentary opposition, and curbing the press, Riza Khan nonetheless used every opportunity, both by stimulating mass action and by stressing in statements the primacy of the wishes of the people, to provide his accumulation of power with a veneer of legitimacy and popular consent.

His agenda for radical constitutional change, first a republic then a change of dynasty, required some form of political backing and legitimacy. Lacking any political party, he resorted directly to the Tehran crowd, a tactic he adopted, and threatened to adopt, repeatedly in his struggle with Ahmad Shah. Furthermore, although usually portrayed as inherently cautious, a political realist and pragmatist, here Riza Khan, with his determination to choreograph the Tehran crowd, appears rather as a reckless gambler with a penchant for the *coup de théâtre*, nowhere betraying the typical bourgeois fear of the mob.<sup>103</sup>

For Riza Khan, however, the Tehran crowd repeatedly proved itself to be a double-edged sword. As a political force it was unreliable and uncontrollable, as were the consequences of its actions. For the authorities, the decision to mobilize a crowd always involved major risks. A particular danger was represented by the fact that Riza Khan's opponents, particularly the *ulama*, with their stronger and more intimate links to the urban population, and their networks of support within the bazaar and among the guilds, were much more adept than the regime at mobilizing crowds. The appearance of any pro-regime crowd was always likely to risk provoking the arrival of a larger and more powerful opposing crowd, often with the aura, in popular eyes, of greater legitimacy. The republican fiasco provided an object lesson in such dangers. Again, there was always a risk that a crowd summoned by the regime might simply turn against its sponsors, as happened so dramatically during the 1925 bread riots.

103. For prevailing attitudes to popular mass action see, for example, Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London, 1909).

The 1925 bread riots were the last appearance of the Tehran crowd on the political stage during Riza Shah's rule. These riots, plus its refusal to be mobilized in support of the change of dynasty, seem to have convinced him of its incorrigible hostility. But, more importantly, Riza Khan ceased to have any use for such a political weapon. With the stabilization of the new dynasty, his struggle with his political enemies in the capital was largely over and his position secure. With the Majlis reduced to docility and the critical press to silence, Riza Khan needed no longer to mobilize crowds in support of his objectives, but rather only to prevent manifestations of popular protest. After 1926 the army, and especially the new police force, were to be exclusively the instruments for the imposition and defence of the new order in Tehran. Even when the provincial cities were wracked by mass protests, in Isfahan and Shiraz in 1927 over conscription, in Tabriz in 1928 over both conscription and clothing reform, and in Mashhad in 1935 over the "European" hat, the capital remained quiescent. It was not till after the abdication of Riza Shah in 1941 that the Tehran crowd regained life and voice.