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# Contested Modernity in Qajar Iran: Statecraft, Public Sphere Formation, And Political Economy from Reform to Constitutionalism (1789–1925)

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the socio-political and economic transformations of Iran under the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925) as a long, conflictual transition in which older monarchical practices persisted while new concepts of state, society, and citizenship gradually took shape. Rather than treating the period as a linear narrative of decline, the study conceptualizes Qajar Iran as a site of "contested modernity," in which reformist statecraft, emergent public spheres, and foreign-imposed constraints produced uneven institutional change and proliferating political imaginaries (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery, Hambly, & Melville, 2008; Floor, 2001). Using a historical-sociological method grounded in interpretive analysis of major historiography and thematic synthesis of intellectual, gender, and media histories, the article reconstructs the mechanisms through which ideas of law, representation, and national sovereignty circulated and became politically consequential, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911) and its afterlives (Afary, 1996; Adamiyet, 1961; Hashemi, 2018). Findings highlight four interlocking dynamics: the limits of patrimonial governance and the partial bureaucratization associated with reformist figures; the expansion of print culture and associational life that enabled new modes of critique and mobilization; the gendered reconfiguration of public discourse, including early feminist and counter-patriarchal argumentation; and the political economy of concessions and fiscal weakness that deepened dependency while also intensifying domestic opposition (Amanat, 1997; Kianfar, 2009; Javadi, Marashi, & Shekrloo, 1992; Motavali, Shabani, & Qanavati, 2015). The discussion argues that the Qajar era's significance lies in how institutional fragility coexisted with a durable transformation in political language, social expectations, and the imagined relationship between ruler and ruled. The article concludes by reframing Qajar Iran as foundational to twentieth-century state formation, not because it achieved modernization successfully, but because it generated the conflicts, vocabularies, and social coalitions that made subsequent centralization projects intelligible and, at times, popular (Abrahamian, 2013; Aminī & Shirazi, 2010).

**Keywords:** Qajar Iran; Constitutional Revolution; political economy; public sphere; gender and reform; state formation; print culture.

## INTRODUCTION

The Qajar dynasty's lifespan coincided with a global historical conjuncture in which imperial expansion, capitalist integration, and the diffusion of constitutional languages increasingly shaped political possibilities across Asia and the Middle East (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery et al., 2008). In Iran, these pressures intersected with internal constraints: a patrimonial monarchy reliant on negotiated authority, a fiscal order unable to capture revenue systematically, and a social structure in which urban notables, clerical networks, and merchant institutions could both sustain and contest the state (Floor, 2001; Flore, 1986). The resulting transformations were neither uniform nor predictable. Reformist measures sometimes

strengthened the center while simultaneously amplifying demands for accountability; foreign concessions undermined sovereignty while provoking new forms of political solidarity; and the growth of print culture created arenas for public reasoning even as censorship and repression attempted to limit such arenas (Amanat, 1997; Kianfar, 2009; Motavali et al., 2015).

A persistent analytical challenge is that "modernization" has often been treated as an external yardstick against which Qajar Iran is judged and found wanting. In many narratives, the dynasty's political weakness, territorial losses, and susceptibility to Russian and British influence are taken as decisive evidence of failure (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery et al., 2008). Yet this approach tends to obscure the deeper historical process by which political concepts and social expectations changed, sometimes irreversibly, even when institutions did not consolidate in the expected direction. A more theoretically productive approach is to examine how modernization was argued over, selectively appropriated, and embedded in new political coalitions—what this article calls "contested modernity" (Adamiyet, 1961; Afary, 1996; Kazemi, 2014). In this view, the Qajar era is significant not simply as a prelude to the Pahlavi period but as a formative arena in which the meaning of law, representation, and sovereignty was repeatedly negotiated (Hashemi, 2018; Aminī & Shirazi, 2010).

Three clusters of scholarship underpin this reframing. First, political histories emphasize the structure of Qajar kingship and its transformations under key reigns, especially under Nasir al-Din Shah, whose monarchy illustrates both the symbolic centrality of the shah and the practical limits of rule through provincial intermediaries (Amanat, 1997; Avery et al., 2008). Second, the literature on constitutionalism and intellectual change shows that new political ideas were not merely imported but actively translated into local debates, drawing on Islamic reformist idioms, notions of justice, and emerging social critiques (Adamiyet, 1961; Adamiyet & Nateg, 1977; Hashemi, 2018). Third, social and gender histories demonstrate that transformations were not limited to elite politics; rather, they also reshaped family norms, women's public participation, and the cultural legitimacy of patriarchy, albeit unevenly and amid strong resistance (Afary, 1996; Etehadieh, 1994; Brookshaw, 2013; Javadi et al., 1992).

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in integrative accounts that link statecraft, public sphere formation, and political economy within a single explanatory narrative that avoids both deterministic decline and triumphalist modernization. Many works richly detail one dimension— court politics, constitutional mobilization, women's activism, or press development—without fully showing how these spheres mutually conditioned each other over time (Amanat, 1997; Afary, 1996; Kianfar, 2009). This article addresses that gap by treating socio-political and economic change as an interdependent system of pressures and responses. The central argument is that Qajar Iran's transformation was driven by the interaction of four forces: (1) the monarchy's attempts at selective reform and administrative rationalization; (2) the emergence of a semi-autonomous public sphere through print and associational life; (3) gendered contestations that reframed social authority and political legitimacy; and (4) a constrained political economy shaped by concessions, fiscal weakness, and external leverage (Abrahamian, 2013; Floor, 2001; Afary, 1996; Motavali et al., 2015).

From this perspective, the Constitutional Revolution becomes less a sudden rupture and more a crystallization of longer processes: the accumulation of critiques of arbitrary rule, the development of mobilizing networks, and the intensification of grievances rooted in economic dependency and administrative predation (Afary, 1996; Adamiyet, 1961; Floor, 2001). Yet it also becomes clear why constitutionalism remained unstable. The very conditions that enabled broad coalition-building— fragmented authority, competing claims to legitimacy, and foreign interference—also hindered durable institutional consolidation (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery et al., 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-sociological methodology, combining interpretive historiography with thematic synthesis. Historical sociology is appropriate because Qajar transformation was not a discrete policy episode but a long process involving changes in political language, institutional practice, and social organization (Kafi, 2016). Rather than attempting to quantify change, the method reconstructs causal pathways by tracing how actors understood problems, justified reforms, and mobilized coalitions, while situating these processes in structural constraints such as fiscal capacity and imperial pressure (Abrahamian, 2013; Floor, 2001).

The primary evidentiary base is the reference set provided, which includes major political histories, analyses of

constitutional mobilization, studies of women and gender discourse, and works on press and socio-cultural change (Amanat, 1997; Afary, 1996; Etehadieh, 1994; Kianfar, 2009). These texts are treated as interpretive "archives" that preserve arguments, conceptual frameworks, and empirical reconstructions. The study follows three analytical steps. First, it identifies recurring explanatory themes across the historiography—state weakness, reformist rationalization, foreign penetration, public sphere expansion, and gendered contestation (Avery et al., 2008; Adamiyet, 1961; Floor, 2001; Javadi et al., 1992). Second, it maps how these themes interact temporally: for example, how concessionary politics influences protest repertoires, or how press expansion reshapes notions of rights and representation (Abrahamian, 2013; Kianfar, 2009; Motavali et al., 2015). Third, it evaluates counter-interpretations within the reference set, such as arguments emphasizing elite-driven reform versus grassroots mobilization, or the relative weight of foreign versus domestic causes (Afary, 1996; Amanat, 1997; Abrahamian, 2013).

To maintain rigor under interpretive constraints, the article treats "findings" as descriptive-analytical claims supported through triangulation across multiple sources rather than as statistical outcomes. Where the sources diverge in emphasis—such as over the role of intellectuals versus merchants—the discussion explicitly frames these as interpretive tensions rather than forcing artificial consensus (Afary, 1996; Adamiyet & Nateg, 1977; Floor, 2001).

## RESULTS

The results are presented as a descriptive analysis of recurrent patterns in Qajar socio-political and economic change, organized around statecraft, public sphere development, gendered transformation, and political economy.

A first finding is that Qajar governance operated through a dual logic: symbolic centralization around the shah and practical decentralization through negotiated authority. Court-centered monarchy could project legitimacy and ritual sovereignty, yet it relied on provincial intermediaries, tax farming arrangements, and elite bargains that limited consistent bureaucratic penetration (Amanat, 1997; Avery et al., 2008; Floor, 2001). This duality produced a state that was neither purely despotic nor institutionally modern: it could act decisively in certain contexts but lacked the infrastructural power to make law uniformly effective across territory (Floor, 2001; Flore, 1986). Consequently, reform projects were frequently partial—strengthening specific institutions while leaving broader administrative fragmentation intact (Adamiyet, 2009; Aminī & Shirazi, 2010).

A second finding is that reformist statecraft, especially in the nineteenth century, generated political learning effects that exceeded the intentions of reformers. Initiatives associated with administrative rationalization and modernization efforts cultivated new expectations about competence, accountability, and the public good (Adamiyet, 2009; Adamiyet, 1961). When such reforms failed or were reversed, they often strengthened critiques of arbitrariness rather than restoring older legitimacy. This pattern is crucial: modernizing projects did not simply "succeed" or "fail"; they reshaped the conceptual field in which legitimacy was debated, thereby making constitutional arguments more plausible later (Adamiyet, 1961; Hashemi, 2018).

A third finding concerns the growth of a public sphere through print culture. The expansion of state and semi-independent press outlets created new channels for circulating political critique, social commentary, and moral debate (Kianfar, 2009; Motavali et al., 2015). This development did not produce a single unified public opinion; rather, it multiplied publics—merchant, clerical, reformist, and elite—each with its own idioms and priorities. Yet even this plurality mattered: it normalized the idea that governance could be discussed, judged, and contested in writing beyond the court's immediate control (Kianfar, 2009; Kazemi, 2014). The press also served as a bridge between economic grievance and political demand, enabling concessionary controversies to be framed as matters of national sovereignty and justice rather than isolated disputes (Abrahamian, 2013; Motavali et al., 2015).

A fourth finding is that gender discourse became a crucial site for negotiating modernity. The Qajar period witnessed sustained debates over the moral and political status of women, the legitimacy of patriarchal authority, and the relationship between domestic order and national progress (Javadi et al., 1992; Etehadieh, 1994). Texts that juxtaposed prescriptions for women's behavior with critiques of men's conduct demonstrate that gender was not simply a private matter but a language for criticizing social hypocrisy and reforming authority (Astarabadi, n.d.;

Javadi et al., 1992). Cultural production by women, including poetic traditions and patronage, further illustrates that women were active participants in shaping elite and semi-public culture, even when formal political participation remained constrained (Brookshaw, 2013; Etehadieh, 1994). These developments intensified during the Constitutional Revolution, where women's mobilization and the articulation of feminist concerns intertwined with constitutionalist politics (Afary, 1996).

A fifth finding is that Qajar political economy combined fiscal weakness with increasing foreign leverage, producing both dependency and resistance. The state's limited capacity to extract revenue reliably created incentives to grant concessions and seek external financing, which in turn undermined sovereignty and fueled popular opposition (Floor, 2001; Abrahamian, 2013). Concessionary politics became not only an economic strategy but a political trigger, catalyzing coalitions among merchants, clerics, and reformist intellectuals by framing economic grievances as collective injuries to the nation (Abrahamian, 2013; Afary, 1996). Over time, this dynamic contributed to the constitutionalist demand that law and representation were necessary safeguards against arbitrary deals that traded public resources for short-term fiscal relief (Hashemi, 2018; Adamiyet, 1961).

A sixth finding is that the Constitutional Revolution functioned as a turning point in political imagination even where institutional outcomes were unstable. The creation of representative institutions and constitutional texts formalized the idea that political authority could be limited, justified, and held accountable through law (Afary, 1996; Hashemi, 2018). Yet the revolution's fragility also reveals the limits of coalition governance in a context of fragmented authority and foreign interference. The constitutionalist coalition encompassed merchants seeking economic protection, clerics defending moral and communal authority, and intellectuals pursuing legal rationalization and national sovereignty; these goals overlapped but were not identical, generating tensions that adversaries could exploit (Afary, 1996; Abrahamian, 2013). Even so, the constitutional moment irreversibly altered the repertoire of political legitimacy: thereafter, claims about governance increasingly required reference to law, representation, and national interest, even when rulers tried to restore older patterns (Abrahamian, 2013; Aminī & Shirazi, 2010).

## DISCUSSION

The results support a reinterpretation of Qajar Iran as a formative arena of contested modernity. This framing avoids the explanatory trap of equating modernization with administrative success alone. Instead, it emphasizes that political modernity can emerge through conflictual debate, partial reform, and repeated institutional experiments whose immediate outcomes may be ambiguous (Adamiyet, 1961; Hashemi, 2018; Kafi, 2016).

The first theoretical implication concerns state formation. A conventional state-centered modernization narrative might argue that because the Qajar state lacked robust bureaucratic institutions and fiscal extraction, it failed at modernization. While empirically accurate in narrow institutional terms, this conclusion risks flattening the period's transformative dynamics (Floor, 2001; Avery et al., 2008). Historical sociology suggests that state formation is not merely the growth of bureaucracy but also the consolidation of legitimacy frameworks and the redefinition of ruler–ruled relations (Kafi, 2016). Under the Qajars, the monarchy's reliance on negotiated authority created openings for social forces—especially bazaar networks and clerical institutions—to assert political leverage. This leverage did not automatically yield stable democracy, but it did shift the political field: rulers increasingly had to respond to collective pressures framed in moral, legal, and national terms (Afary, 1996; Abrahamian, 2013).

A second implication concerns the nature of the public sphere. Print culture's expansion did not simply "inform" the population; it reorganized the social production of political meaning by enabling critique to circulate beyond courtly settings (Kianfar, 2009). The press also facilitated a translation process in which European constitutional concepts were reinterpreted through local idioms. In the Qajar context, constitutionalism became persuasive not because it was foreign, but because it could be articulated as a means of securing justice, restraining arbitrariness, and protecting the community's material interests (Adamiyet, 1961; Kazemi, 2014). This observation complicates simplistic diffusion models in which ideas travel unchanged from Europe to Iran. Instead, ideas were domesticated through struggle, producing hybrid conceptual formations that combined moral reform, legal rationalization, and national sovereignty (Adamiyet & Nateg, 1977; Hashemi, 2018).

A third implication concerns political economy. Dependency-oriented interpretations emphasize foreign concessions and imperial leverage as central obstacles to autonomous development (Abrahamian, 2013; Floor, 2001). The findings align with this view but add a crucial nuance: dependency was politically productive in the sense that it generated a language of sovereignty and collective injury that could unify diverse social actors. Concessions did not only extract resources; they transformed grievances into claims about the nation's ownership of its future, making constitutional safeguards appear necessary (Hashemi, 2018; Afary, 1996). Yet the same dependency also undermined constitutional stabilization by enabling external actors to manipulate internal conflicts. Thus, foreign influence operated simultaneously as a constraint on institutional development and as a catalyst for political consciousness (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery et al., 2008).

A fourth implication concerns gender and modernity. The Qajar-era gender debates demonstrate that modernization was not solely a matter of state institutions; it also involved contesting the moral foundations of authority. Patriarchy functioned as a microcosm of political absolutism: the question of whether men could rule women without accountability paralleled the question of whether rulers could govern subjects without law (Javadi et al., 1992; Astarabadi, n.d.). When texts criticized male hypocrisy or asserted women's moral agency, they implicitly challenged the broader culture of unaccountable authority (Javadi et al., 1992; Etehadieh, 1994). Afary's account of the Constitutional Revolution further underscores that feminist consciousness and constitutionalism were intertwined: women's participation was not an accidental byproduct but an expression of changing political subjectivity (Afary, 1996). At the same time, subsequent limitations on women's rights remind us that political openings can coexist with enduring patriarchal structures; modernization can be selective, and constitutional language can be invoked without fully transforming social hierarchies (Etehadieh, 1994; Kian, 1997).

A fifth implication addresses why constitutionalism remained unstable. The constitutional project emerged from a coalition whose cohesion depended on a shared opposition to arbitrary rule but whose positive visions diverged. Merchants sought predictable governance and protection from predatory taxation and concessionary policies; clerics sought to preserve moral authority and community autonomy; intellectuals sought legal rationalization and state transformation (Afary, 1996;

Adamiyet, 1961; Floor, 2001). Such coalitions are powerful in moments of rupture but difficult to sustain once institutional design requires difficult compromises. This helps explain why constitutional institutions could be created yet remain vulnerable. The revolution changed political imagination more reliably than it changed the coercive and fiscal capacities required to defend constitutional order against internal and external enemies (Abrahamian, 2013; Avery et al., 2008).

Limitations of this study arise from the constraints of evidence selection: the analysis is based strictly on the provided reference set and thus reflects the emphases and silences of that scholarship. For instance, while the Cambridge history offers broad coverage, certain regional or subaltern experiences may remain underrepresented compared to urban-centered narratives (Avery et al., 2008; Floor, 2001). Similarly, the gender-focused works illuminate women's participation but cannot fully reconstruct all forms of everyday social transformation in the absence of additional primary sources (Etehadieh, 1994; Brookshaw, 2013). Nonetheless, within these constraints, the integrative framework clarifies how political and economic pressures interacted with cultural and gendered debates to generate a durable transformation in political language and social expectations (Abrahamian, 2013; Afary, 1996).

Future research directions suggested by the reference set include deeper analysis of how press discourse shaped political participation over time, especially by mapping shifts in rhetorical framing from moral critique to constitutional legality (Kianfar, 2009; Motavali et al., 2015). Another promising direction is comparative historical sociology: placing Qajar Iran alongside other late imperial and semi-peripheral contexts to explore how dependency, reformist statecraft, and emergent publics interact under imperial pressure (Kafi, 2016; Abrahamian, 2013). Finally, further synthesis of gender history with political economy could illuminate how debates about household governance and women's education were linked to broader anxieties about national strength and economic autonomy (Javadi et al., 1992; Etehadieh, 1994; Afary, 1996).

**CONCLUSION**

The Qajar era was a foundational period of Iranian transformation characterized by institutional fragility and conceptual innovation. The monarchy's patrimonial

structure limited bureaucratic consolidation, yet reformist statecraft and repeated crises altered how legitimacy was argued and contested (Amanat, 1997; Adamiyet, 2009; Floor, 2001). The expansion of print culture and the emergence of a plural public sphere facilitated critique, mobilization, and the redefinition of political problems as matters of justice, law, and national sovereignty (Kianfar, 2009; Kazemi, 2014). Gender discourse and women's cultural and political participation further demonstrate that Qajar modernization was not confined to state institutions; it also unfolded through social debates over authority, morality, and the meaning of progress (Afary, 1996; Etehadieh, 1994; Javadi et al., 1992; Brookshaw, 2013).

Economically, concessionary politics and fiscal weakness deepened dependency while also generating powerful oppositional coalitions that came to view constitutionalism as a protective architecture against arbitrary rule and foreign extraction (Abrahamian, 2013; Floor, 2001; Hashemi, 2018). The Constitutional Revolution represented the crystallization of these long-term dynamics. Even where its institutions remained unstable, it embedded a lasting shift in political imagination: the idea that authority must be constrained by law, that representation can articulate collective interest, and that sovereignty belongs not only to rulers but also to a political community capable of judgment and action (Afary, 1996; Hashemi, 2018; Abrahamian, 2013).

Reframed as contested modernity, Qajar Iran appears neither as a simple story of failure nor as a straightforward tale of progress. It was a prolonged struggle over the meaning of the state, the boundaries of identity, the legitimacy of gendered authority, and the economic conditions of sovereignty (Amanat & Vejdani, 2012; Abrahamian, 2013). The dynasty's historical importance lies in the conflicts it hosted and the vocabularies it generated—vocabularies that would shape subsequent state-building projects and continue to influence Iranian political discourse well beyond 1925 (Aminī & Shirazi, 2010; Abrahamian, 2013).

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