

## The Constitutional Revolution: The First Decade

Mansoureh Ettehadieh (Nezam-Mafi)

Iran's 1906 constitutional revolution occurred after decades of half-hearted attempts at political and social reform. The revolution aimed, first and foremost, at limiting the absolute power of the crown and replacing the arbitrary and unruly religious courts by a uniform and accountable judicial system. Mozaffar al-Din Shah finally succumbed to the pressures of the leading ulama and intellectuals and signed a constitution, drawn primarily from the Belgian constitution, which called for the creation of a parliamentary system based on relative separation of powers and specified the basic rights and freedoms of the Iranian citizens.

This article attempts to analyze the causes of the crisis that engulfed the constitutional movement so soon after it attained its primary goals. The internal power plays among various factions and personalities in the first three sessions of the newly-created Majles, the persistent shifting of alliances between the old-guard politicians and the constitutionalists offers an insight into the reasons for the failure of parliamentarianism in Iran at the turn of the century.

According to the author, basically four set of factors contributed to this failure. The first set of factors related to the inherent weakness and conceptual inconsistencies in the Constitution and the various electoral laws that were enacted in this early period. The author, moreover, argues that it was practically impossible to adapt European constitutional norms to Iranian social conditions and political traditions. The second factor related to the division among ulama regarding the desirability of a western style parliamentary government. With the mounting opposition of the traditionalist ulama the constitutional movement was gradually deprived of the initial support of a number of the more modern religious leaders. Thirdly, the role played by the extremist political parties and associations [*anjomans*] during the first session of the Majles and the subsequent self-serving activities of the political parties in the second and third sessions, must be considered as another cause of the developing constitutional crisis. For these activities radicalized the constitutional movement into a veritable revolution. Finally, the persistent meddling of both the British and Russian governments -which had partitioned Iran into their separate spheres of influence- in the internal affairs of Iran further undermined the remaining chances for the survival of a true parliamentary system in Iran.