

Iran's Experiment with Parliamentary Governance: The Second Majles, 1909-1911, by Mangol Bayat. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020. 520 pp., \$45 paperback, 978-0-8156-3686-1.

In this long-awaited book, Professor Mangol Bayat offers the first ever English-language monograph focusing on Iran's second Majles, 1909-11. While there are several rich accounts of the Constitutional Revolution covering aspects such as the place of Islam and the ulama (Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism*; idem, *Iran between Islamic Nationalism and Secularism*; Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the Clerical Leadership of Khurasani*), the impact of grassroots democracy, social democracy, women and minorities (Janet Afary, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution, 1906-11*; Hourri Berberian, *Armenians And The Iranian Constitutional Revolution Of 1905-1911*), as well as the role played by religious dissidents (Bayat's own previous book, *Iran's First Revolution*), these have tended to focus more on the period 1906-9, revolving around the creation of Iran's first constitution and parliament. Yet as Bayat shows in this new book, the second Majles was of equal significance in determining the revolution's lasting legacy. By closely examining this important subject, Bayat provides an indispensable account for understanding the fate of the revolution and its wider significance in the history of modern Iran.

From the beginning of the book, Bayat sets out to emphasise that the constitutional revolution was predominantly shaped by the 'secular legacy of the Enlightenment', especially 'French revolutionary ideology' (preface, ix). This remained the case, Bayat argues, when the Majles was restored in 1909 following the 'lesser tyranny', such that even when two political parties emerged for the first time in the country's legislature – the Democrats and Moderates – they fundamentally shared the same vision of a 'New Iran'. Both parties ultimately worked towards similar secular, modernist goals in the Majles to govern 'one indivisible nation composed of a multiethnic, multireligious citizenry with equality before the law' (preface x-xi). Yet in their attempts to do so through centrifugal reforms, Majles deputies alienated the country's traditional elite, especially over religious matters; individual actors and especially foreign powers (mainly Britain and Russia) who were opposed to the reforms exploited these tensions to divide the parties and pit the legislature against the government. Bayat's central argument in the book is that it was these machinations, rather than inherent ideological differences between prominent constitutionalists, that ultimately brought about the demise of the second Majles, and with it the revolution itself.

Bayat demonstrates how these events unfolded in great detail over the course of approximately four hundred pages. The book is structured chronologically, divided into thirteen chapters. The introduction and the first three chapters set out the context of the revolution and outline the events of 1906-9. Chapters 4-6 then begin the main narrative, first detailing how the Directorate governed the country following the restoration of the Constitution in 1909. This section provides important details on the trial and execution of the *mojtahed* Fazlollah Nuri as well as on how the second Majles and its parties took shape and began introducing reforms. Chapters 7-9 cover important episodes that plunged the Majles into crisis in 1910 such as the assassination of Ayatollah Behbehani and the Battle of Atabak Park, marking when 'factionalism, personal rivalry, and intrigues eroded the constitutionalist united front' (p. 214). Finally, chapters 10-13 examine the Majles's renewed efforts to implement centrifugal reforms in late 1910 and 1911. Here the book pays attention to the recruitment of foreign experts, especially the American Morgan Shuster as a financial adviser, before showing how royalist and

foreign intervention undermined the Majles and ultimately helped bring about its dissolution on 24 December 1911.

Although these events are well known, the originality of Bayat's account comes through the level of detail about the ideological and personal politics of the second Majles. Bayat has closely examined the proceedings of the Majles, *Mozakerat-e Majles-e dovvom*, synthesising these with archival sources from Britain and France as well as memoirs, periodicals and newspapers. As such, Bayat offers much needed information about tensions between politicians and debates in the Majles on key issues: education policy; women's rights; disarming the mojahedin and forming a police/standing army; market regulations, food provisioning and even the 'human rights' (p. 310) of the poor; utilising foreign expertise and natural resources; and, perhaps most importantly, judicial reform. In doing so, Bayat challenges simplistic interpretations that reduce the demise of the Majles to divisions between its two parties; although deputies often disagreed on such matters, they did not necessarily do so along party lines, and there were also deep divisions within both the Democrats and Moderates. Rather, these were contentious debates because of the extreme difficulties the country suffered, for which there were no clear solutions when faced with the threat of foreign intervention. Moreover, Bayat also offers much insight into the individual politics and personal relationships of prominent figures such as Hasan Taqizadeh, Sardar As'ad and Sepahdar as they negotiated this fractious political landscape. This degree of detail makes the book ideally suited to specialists in the field, although Bayat does offer sufficient context for those more unfamiliar with the events to also follow.

Although the account focuses on a short period, Bayat convincingly highlights the significance of the second Majles in the history of modern Iran. First, despite many challenges, the Majles was able to introduce some important lasting reforms, for example universal elementary education. Second, even the policies discussed in the Majles that were unresolved before its dissolution continued to be discussed among the country's elites, setting the policy agenda for Reza Shah. Indeed, the second Majles prioritised the creation of a standing army and police force to curb 'lawlessness' and tribal authority, much as Reza Shah would do. Moreover, the tensions within the Majles over key issues continued for many decades, especially secularising legal reform and recruiting foreign experts. Thus, Bayat's work further enhances our understanding of the Reza Shah period as a continuation of Constitutional Revolution in several aspects rather than as a fundamental break (with a notable exception being the type of nationalism promoted). Indeed, as Bayat emphasises, both parties in the second Majles agreed on the need for centrifugal reforms even if these came at the expense of the revolution's earlier democratic tendencies. Even the Democrats' social democratic policies were side-lined: while some deputies discussed land redistribution and anti-hoarding measures, there was no serious attempt to implement such policies. Thus, the foundations were already in place for a more authoritarian form of modernisation.

It should be noted, however, that the book's scope narrows its coverage of the wider processes of the revolution. Like many other accounts of the revolution, and for valid reasons, the focus is mostly on events in Tehran and Tabriz rather than its provincial politics. To be sure, Bayat does point out the impact of unrest in Fars province, but discusses this as a product of personal rivalries between tribal leaders like Sowlat al-Dowleh and Qavam al-Molk rather than of popular resistance to centrifugal policies and struggles over subsistence. On the whole, the book is less concerned with non-elite sources and what they might reveal about contestations over popular sovereignty beyond the Majles. One exception is when Bayat highlights the wave of petitions sent to the Majles complaining of food shortages and grain hoarding in 1910, but

these are not discussed in great length compared to deputies' memoirs and parliamentary sessions (pp. 182-83).

Perhaps the reliance on elite sources leads to the book's unfavourable impression of the revolution's popular dynamics. For example, Bayat claims that in the summer of 1910 the mojahedin 'generated unabated chaos, fueling a rising political crisis that eventually and ironically would put an end to their freewheeling comportment in Tehran' (p. 168). Of course, given the lack of available sources, it is difficult to know more about the motivations and mentalities of the mojaheds: why, for example, figures like Sattar Khan and Baqer Khan really aligned with the Moderates and were engaged in the Battle of Atabak Park, which was one of the key turning points in the revolution. But such popular contestation and dissent cannot be dismissed as necessarily external or in opposition to the revolution, especially in the absence of subaltern voices.

Therefore, even though Bayat convincingly argues that there was a shared view of a 'New Iran' in the Majles rooted in Enlightenment thought, it is more debatable whether this vision defined the revolution itself. Bayat suggests that at this time 'the Enlightenment and French revolutionary ideology irresistibly appealed to countries in Africa and Asia' so much that constitutionalists had 'no alternative' to turn to (p. 159). For Bayat, pro-constitutional Islamic reformism fundamentally inherited Enlightenment ideas about reason, science and secular law (pp. 4-5). However, even if one accepts this disputable position, it should not overshadow how constitutionalists sought to usurp the established order in ways that also challenged or modified European modernity. As works more focused on the transnational dimensions of the revolution show, there were other sources of inspiration for constitutionalists such as Japan, the *Nahda*, and Russian social democracy (for example, Houchang E. Chehabi and Vanessa Martin, eds., *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations and Transnational Connections* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010)), although Bayat does devote considerable attention to Transcaucasian social democratic networks.

Such currents are less evident than secular liberalism in the book's representation of constitutionalist discourse, which is understandable given the focus on policy and prominent politicians like Taqizadeh. However, there remains little evidence to suggest that secularism was more important than subsistence and social justice for the majority that took part in protests and sent petitions outlining grievances. Indeed, Stephanie Cronin has recently argued that mass participation in the constitutional revolution built on years of popular struggles over subsistence, especially bread riots (Stephanie Cronin, 'Bread and Justice in Qajar Iran: The Moral Economy, the Free Market and the Hungry Poor', *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 6 (2018): 843-77).

Nevertheless, the book still makes for essential reading on the second Majles itself and how its fate was intertwined with that of the revolution. By providing a rich and much needed account on the intricacies of the Majles, Bayat consummately demonstrates how it was the interference of Britain and Russia rather than any intrinsic deficiencies in Iran's capacity for democracy that continually undermined and eventually crushed the country's 'experiment with parliamentary governance'. Moreover, Bayat indicates how the second Majles had a lasting legacy as many of its policies and debates continued to shape the country's political landscape in the years ahead. In all, then, the book shows how these two years were crucial in the making of modern Iran.