

An analysis of political and social thought of Akhund Khorasani in constitutional revolution

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Abstract: Although Akhund Khorasani was one of the traditional lecturers – one of the most prominent figures of traditional thought – in Shiite world, he succeeded to turn the traditional knowledge taught in religious school to a driver of scientific, political and social reforms in Iran. He succeeded to found a new thought, both in the field of science, and in political and social realms, from within what was considered to be obsolete, establishing a new system and order in the history of thought based on an old organization. He was a perfect example of reformists in this field, and a scholar with a fighting, and pious character, of whom Shiites are proud. It is seen from study of courses on Islamic jurisprudence and principles of Islamic jurisprudence held in the last fifty decades that most scholars and prominent religious authorities have been students of Akhund Khorasani. Also, among his words are found examples of innovations in Islamic jurisprudence and principles of Islamic jurisprudence, each of which open new horizons for Islamic jurisprudence and principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Akhund Khorasani was an influential figure both in theory and in practice in constitutional revolution. He provided religious justifications for his important political positions, issuing important religious decrees in support of constructional revolution. Influenced by the intellectual trends of his time, his political writings show his political and jurisprudential innovations.

Key words: *Akhund Khorasani; Political thought; Constitutional revolution; Parliament; Law*

1. Introduction

Akhund Khorasani is among the heroes of Iranian history, and one of politician scholars of Islamic history. He was one of scholars whose endorsement of constitutional government caused several thousand years' monarch government of Iran to be turned to constitutional government, and in fact, he is among the founders of Constitutional Revolution of Iran, and played an essential role in developments of Constitutional Revolution. When Mirza Shirazi went to Samarra, Akhund Khorasani also stayed there with his master; however, he then returned to Najaf upon request of his master, to teach as one of the most prominent Shiite scholars. He also played a pivotal role in Tobacco Protest against the monarch system as he was in Najaf. He was a religious authority, a lecturer at Seminary of Najaf and a political leader of the Constitutional Revolution in 13th and 14th centuries A.H. (a team of researchers from Seminary of Qom, 1999, vol. 1, p. 431).

2. Political and Ideological Thoughts of Akhund Khorasani

In addition to short-term and temporary objectives including overthrowing the mythical

picture of the king as shadow of god, and dispelling the spirit of fatalism, victory of Constitutional Revolution, led by Shiite religious authorities, boosted morale of religious scholars, and improved their social and political position in Iranian community. Upon decease of Mirza Shirazi and Mirza Habib Allah Rashti in 1894, Akhund Khorasani was among the prominent religious authorities of his time including Mulla Muhammad Sharabiani (1904), Sheikh Muhammad Hassan Mamaqani (1905), Mirza Hossein Tehrani (1908), and Seyyed Muhammad Kazem Yazdi (1918). If Constitutional Revolution didn't fail, and Akhund Khorasani came to Iran, he could become the religious and political leader of Iran, and his works and biography would receive much more attention.

In addition to his high scientific thoughts, it is necessary to study Akhund Khorasani's political and combative life. Having appointed as religious authority, he enjoined the king to the good, and prevented him from the evil as he saw he oppress his people (Safaei, 1983).

In his book about the combative life of Akhund Khorasani, Ha'iri wrote, "It is seen from study of the conditions of his time, including tortures by Qajar king, Constitutional Revolution, and violent invasion of Iran by Russia and Britain, that he never stopped fighting" (Ha'iri, 1999).

Akhund's support for Constitutional Revolution was one of the causes of progress of Constitutional

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Revolution in Iran. And, his intention was enforcement of shariah (Kasravi, 2008). He described his motive in assuming the leadership of Constitutional Revolution as follows: "We are at the verge of revolution, and social and political reforms will happen sooner or later; religious scholars who claim leadership of Islamic community must either take the intellectual leadership of the Constitutional Revolution, or they would leave the field open for secular scholars (Saraei).

3. Political Objective and Positions of Akhund Khorasani

Letters, telegrams, and political messages the late Akhund Khorasani sent from Najaf to Iran and other parts of the world, just before, during and after the Constitutional Revolution, show his cultural and political positions, his motives in supporting (Turkaman, 1993). According to the books of prominent Shiite jurists, Akhund Mulla Muhammad Kazim Khorasani, Hajj Mirza Hassan Mirza Khalil and Sheikh Abdullah Mazandarani rose in support of principles of Islam, and took leadership of the national constitutional movement, stating that people were obliged to support principles of shariah and the national government (Aghighi Bakhshayeshi, 1984).

Thus, Akhund Khorasani's sole intention in support of constitutional movement, and majlis and rule of law in Iran was establishing justice and eliminating injustice, rather than seeking power (Malekzadeh, 1992). When the news of victory of constitutional revolution reached Najaf, he happily wrote a letter to national consultative assembly, inviting representatives to enforcement of Islamic law, expressing hope that Iran would become one of the most power nations in the world, and instructing them to properly enforce the rules of Islam as the main causes of progress (Majid Kafaei, 1980).

There were two views among representatives regarding legislation of laws. First was view of awakened Shiite clergies, led by Akhund Khorasani from Najaf, and martyred Sheikh Fazl Allah from Iran. Second was view of westernized scholars such as Taghizadeh. The late Akhund sometimes expressed his views in discussions, saying, "Now that Imam Mahdi is absent, and shariah is not enforced, the unjust rules are inevitably enforced, so, it is better to convene majlis to consult scholars' opinion so as to prevent monarchy and injustice" (Kasravi, 1999). To study articles of the Constitution, Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri drew up bill of "Principles of supervision of jurists", and submitted it to majlis after having it signed by religious scholars (Turkaman, 1985). He also had this bill published to prepared ground for approval of it and informing people and scholars of its details (ibid). However, much opposition was raised against this article and other amendments. For example, Taghizadeh and some other representatives of Azerbaijan stressed that its discussion in majlis must be delayed and

asked majlis to declare it as incompetent (Kasravi, 1999).

Finally, on June 14, 1907, a chapter providing for ongoing supervision of religious authorities, comprised an amended version of the bill proposed by Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, was approved, and attached to the Constitution by majlis (Turkaman, 1993, Supervision of top religious authorities; evolutions of the article 2 of the Constitution in the first term of majlis). On June 18, 1907, Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri sent a telegram to majlis through Akhund and Mazandarani (Turkaman, 1985). Akhund agreed to the proposed bill of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, and also stressed on necessity of agreement of approved laws with shariah. Besides, Akhund stressed on necessity of making another article into law in order to dispel disbelievers, which was always a concern of Sheikh (Kasravi, 1999).

The fact that Najaf's scholars gave this telegram to majlis through Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri shows that they trusted and believed in him. Not only Najaf's scholars were agreed with opinions of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, but also they provided suggestions that were even more radical than that of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri from perspective of opponents of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri. Their suggestion imposed more limitations on constitutionalists and representatives, and provided more power for supervisor religious scholars. After putting forward this bill, Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri became target of abusive language by some press and night letter writers, was attacked by misguided hooligans. Even, some members of secret societies planned to murder him. Since the text of the constitution was difference from the text proposed by Sheikh, he kept trying to have the exact text of the bill approved by majlis. However, opposition to Sheikh also continues (Najafi, 1996). Kasravi wrote in this regard. Liberalist knew that they could not publicly attach their enemy at least for years, and therefore, they lost much to clergies. Evidently, as soon as liberalists would take over power, they would suspend this article (Kasravi, 1999). Amendments made by religious scholars, including Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, to the supplementary constitutional law were supposed to be approved by majlis, but they remained in abeyance due to influence of Taghizadeh and his like-minded colleagues.

Following this, actions were taken against Sheikh and his advocates, and their lives were endangered. On June 21, 1907, Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri and his advocates migrated to Shrine of Hazrat Abd al-Aziz as an act of protest, where held sit-in along with a number of Tehran's religious scholars, students of seminary schools, and different groups of people. Mustoufi Tafreshi said, "After thirty four days, the number of people participating in the sit-in reached one thousand; they were from different classes, but most from among religious scholars and students of seminaries (Turkaman, 1985). As the sit-in started, constitutionalists tried to make people participating in sit-in look bad so to neutralize their action; therefore, in response to telegram of participants of

sit-in, they sent a letter to Najaf's scholars in which they slandered the participants of the sit-in (Kasravi, 1999).

Since constitutionalists knew that Najaf's scholars trusted and believed in Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri and his companions in all stages of the revolution, and knew that they supported ideas of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, so they constitutionalists sought to cause disunion between them and Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri and his companions (Kasravi, 1999).

Shortly after, westernized intellectuals and missionaries gradually took over power and removed clerics from power. Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, who was among the pioneers of Constitutional Revolution held sit-in in Shrine of Hazrat Abd al-Azim as an act of protest to deviation of the revolution from its original objectives and influence of westerners on high profile officials and representatives. He wrote a letter to Akhund and others, stating, "You said majlis must be based on enjoinder of the good and prohibition of evil, elimination of injustice, protection of Islam, and public welfare; we also support such majlis, but the current majlis everything but what you said it should be" (Kasravi, 1999).

When Akhund Khorasani heard the rulers of Iran intend to torture Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, he sent a telegram to Tehran, and warned constitutionalists against harming him; however, westernized constitutionalists hid Akhund's letter, and then, put Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri on trial and executed him. Having heard about martyrdom of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, Akhund cried and removed his headband off and throw it away on the ground. Akhund held funeral of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri at his own house. Opportunists martyred, imprisoned, or exiled tens of combative religious authorities in Tehran and other cities on the accusation of opposition to constitutional revolution; after martyrdom of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, advocates of religiously legitimate constitutionalism underwent many sufferings (A team of researchers from Seminary of Qom, 1999). Also, on March 3, 1909, Akhund and Mazandarani said in response to a question regarding the rights of religious minorities, "It is forbidden to persecute religious minorities, including Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian, and it is incumbent on every Muslim to observe instructions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) regarding observance of their rights (ibid).

4. False accusations against Akhund Khorasani

Some falsely accused religious scholars of not being aware of the true meaning of constitutionalism when they endorsed it, while Akhund Khorasani and other religious scholars involved in Constitutional Revolution stated in their telegrams that they endorsed Constitutional Revolution knowingly based on comparison with condition of Iran before Constitutional Revolution and how condition of Iran would be after Constitutional Revolution. Such false accusations against religious school were rooted in

failure to distinguish between western constitutionalism and Shiite constitutionalism.

Social and political activities and anti-monarchy measures of Akhund Khorasani were not limited to the Constitutional Revolution, but he was engaged in such measures for many years before Constitutional Revolution started, for example, he a very intense dispute raised between him and Iran's consul in Najaf in which Akhund strongly criticized Naser al-Din Shah, and also, in Tobacco Protest, he was among the main pillars of the front supporting anti-monarchy movements of Mirza Shirazi in Najaf.

There are correspondences available as regards relationship between Akhund Khorasani and Seyyed Jamal al-Din Asadbadi (Dawlatabad, 1982; Afshar, 1980). It can be said regarding relationship between Akhund Khorasani and Seyyed Jamal al-Din Asadbadi that Akhund Khorasani was agreed with political and ideological intentions of Seyyed Jamal al-Din Asadbadi, and the spirit of companions of Akhund in Constitutional Movement has been said to be the spirit of Seyyed Jamal al-Din Asadbadi (Nazem Al-Islam Kermani, 1998). Among false accusations against Akhund was that of his involvement in murder of Sheikh Fazl Allah, his hostility towards Sheikh Fazl Allah.

Seyyed Muhammad Shushtari wrote, "The late Akhund engaged in justice seeking movement in the beginning of Constitutional Revolution following the letters Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri sent to him as Akhund was in Najaf. It is clearly seen from the letters exchanged between Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri and Akhund, whether directly or through Agha Ziya' and Kianouri (the second eldest son of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri), that Akhund engaged in Constitutional Revolution based on instructions of Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri, which indicates that others envied the friendship between these two grand persons (Shushtari, 1948; Turkaman, 1993).

The late Mirza Yusof Mujtahid Ardabili, who was a pupil of Akhund Khorasani, said, "I said to Akhund, 'I have received a letter from Ardabil, asking if you consider Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri as one spreading mischief on the land, and deserving death', and Akhund strongly denied this, and said, 'If people like Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri are considered as one spreading mischief on the land, then what kind of people could be considered as clean competent reformer?' Elsewhere, Akhund said, 'No bill that is contrary to shariah of Islam would be approved by the majlis in which Sheikh Fazl Allah Nuri is a member'" (Turkaman, 1985).

Also, it was false stated that there was dispute between Seyyed Muhammad Kzem Yazdi and Akhund Khorasani, and that Seyyed Muhammad Kzem Yazdi called Akhund Khorasani "irreligious", while Seyyed Muhammad Kzem Yazdi always supported Akhund Khorasani in Akhund's protests against corruption of courtiers, in case of establishment of Islamic company, in case of libas al-taqwa (raiment of righteousness), in case of migration of Akhund to Iran, or in case of necessity of defending and Jihad against westerners and

Russians. In case of signing of Constitution Decree and majlis, after Mirza Tehrani and Mazandarani signed it, the late Yazdi said, "Signature by Tehrani and Akhund is sufficient endorsement, and my signature will not be required" (Aghanajafi Ghuchani, 1999).

In fact, even if there was any dispute between scholars, it was in terms of methodology. The spirit of constitution was that of Mirza Shirazi, while he was not even alive during Constitutional Revolution, as he died in 1984 and Constitution was signed in 1906, with all scholars involved in Constitutional Revolution, whether constitutionalist or advocates of religiously legitimate constitution, that is, the three constitutionalist religious authorities, including Akhund Khorasani, Mulla Abdullah Mazandarani and Mirza Khalil Tehrani, and on the other hand, the late Seyyed Kazem Tabatabai Yazdi and Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, all were immediate students of Mirza Shirazi. They had no difference in principles; they all were students of one teacher. They all shared the same intention, but they had different methods to realize their intention. Constitutional movement as a justice seeking movement actually sought to extend the scope of rules of Islam and shairah; and religious scholars who believed that customary and non-religious authorities were not just and were treacherous, decide to extend the rules of Islam to government. However, Akhund Khorasani was distant from the environment in which the revolution was occurring, and therefore, he had to manage the events by letters and telegrams, but after a while he found out that managing the events from afar didn't work.

As leader of the movement, Akhund Khorasani, was in Najaf, while the event centered in Tehran, the fact that the leader was far from the center of the events caused the leader fails to properly monitor the developments and people. During years of dispute between the constitutionalists and advocates of religiously legitimate constitution, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri couldn't communicate Akhund Khorasani who was in Najaf. During these years, the son of Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, who was in Najaf, wrote him letters, saying that people who wrote letter to Akhund Khorasani were not trustable, and deceived Akhund; on the other hand, since Akhund was completely under blockade, letter of Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri didn't reach him. In a speech Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri gave while holding sit-in in Shrine of Hazrat Abd al-Azim, he took a pocket Qur'an out of his pocket, and said, "I swear by the Qur'an that I have no difference with Akhund Khorasani, my problem is with the type of constitutionalism that is advocated by the westernized people". However, the day after, all westernized newspapers wrote that what Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri took out of his pocket was his cigarette box and not the Qur'an. Sheikh said, "Every time I wished to speak to people transparently, they made a fuss, and prevented my voice to reach people; however, I swear by the Qur'an, that I have no problem with

constitutionalism as practiced by Akhund Khorasani" (Turkaman, 1985).

Intellectuals including Taghizadeh faction sent a telegram to Akhund Khorasani, stating, "We are seeking freedom and equality from constitutionalism, what's your opinion?", to which Akhund Khorasani responded that Islam had no problem with freedom and equality, and issued the decree stating that cooperation with their faction is obligatory and opposition to their faction constituted war against Imam Mahdi (PBUH) (Nazem al-Islam Kermani, 1998). This decree spread through Tehran fast. On the other hand, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri very well knew people who sent telegram, and issued decree that they were affiliated with foreigners and enemies of Imam Mahdi (PBUH), and that it was obligatory not to cooperate with them. So, people were confused as to why two trusted religious authorities issued two contradictory decrees; hence the dissension (Kasravi, 1999). And hence Akhund Khorasani's famous statement, "I intended to make vinegar, but it turned out to be wine. I will go back to Iran to break the crock of the wine that I made". He gave this speech at night before the day when he was going to go back to Iran along with a group of religious scholars after saying Morning Prayer at the shrine of Imam Ali (PBUH). However, he was suspiciously intoxicated, and died at the dawn (Majid Kafaei, 1980). Another point to note regarding methodologies of advocates of religiously legitimate constitutionalism and constitutionalists is that Akhund Khorasani, Mulla Abdullah Mazandarani, and Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri knew that people with whom they must form alliance are not constitutionalists, because they knew the nature of them. However, there was a difference between three religious authorities; Akhund Khorasani and his advocates believed that advocates religiously legitimate constitutionalists and constitutionalists had a common enemy at that point of time, and so, advocates religiously legitimate constitutionalism should focus on their differences with constitutionalists at that point of time, but they should remove the corrupted constitutionalists after victory of Constitutional Revolution. On the other side, Sheikh Fazlollah was against this method, believing that if they took the first step wrongly, no good result would be obtained. So, he instructed his advocates not to share power with westernized constitutionalists because it would hard to remove them from power later. He said,

"Now that you have the power, you should issue a decree that the people must remove them from power, because the people back you, because if they manage to establish themselves in the constitutional movement, you will not be able to remove them from power easily". Therefore, there was a methodological difference between religious authorities. Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri believed that the westernized intellectuals must be eliminated, but the late Akhund Khorasani believed that intellectuals could be removed from power after victory of revolution as well. Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri had a better knowledge

of the West and westernized intellectuals, and so, was more pessimistic about the West, compared with Akhund Khorasani, and other scholars in Najaf (Turkaman, 1985).

Famous Iran-loving British orientalist, Edward Browne, described efforts of Akhund in his book "Persian Revolution of 1905-1909", and including the manuscript of Akhund's decree prohibiting persecution of Zoroastrians, mentioned him as a grand religious authority (Majid Kafaei, 1980).

5. Conclusion

Based on letter and telegraphs sent by him, the main reasons why Akhund Khorasani supported Constitutional Revolution can be summarized as follows:

1. Providing ground for economic advancement, which one of his main concerns, as constitutional government could set a limit on spending and earnings of Shah and local governors, and mobilize committed elites and budget makers in line with national progress.
2. Protecting political and economic independence of Iran and ending rule of foreigners over Iran, as one of the main reasons of foreigner's dominance over a country is underdevelopment of that country. Providing ground for progress and supervising foreign companies and their employees, and also, supervising relationships between Iran and foreign states could provide ground for protecting independence of Iran.
3. Promotion of social justice: The Constitutional Revolution was mainly ignited by oppression in Iran in those days (Rezvani). One of main motivations and objectives of Akhund Khorasani was to support the newly established system. Given the official religion of Iran is Islam, the truth of constitutionalism and freedom of Iran would be ensuring that government and people would not infringe specific laws of Islam, which are based on Shiite jurisprudence (Aghanajafi Ghuchani, 1999).
4. Difference between religious law and non-religious law: All scholars were unanimous that shariah provided for and supported freedom and equality. However, they defended freedom and equality as long as such freedom and equality provided by Majlis didn't contradict shariah. They found themselves obliged to oppose atheists who denied Islam and were enemies of Islam (Turkaman, 1985).
5. Their top priorities were to put end to westernization and interference of foreigners in government, and to end monarchy.

Undoubtedly, Shiite scholars neither were agreed with monarchy, nor could be indifferent to westernized people and colonialism. In the meantime, the fact that religious scholars considered the threat of monarchy to be much stronger than threat of westernization, they didn't much focus on fighting westernization, and thus, western constitutionalism gradually became the dominant trend. However, the role of the British Embassy was

very important in deviation of the Constitutional Revolution from its original targets, which were establishing justice and eliminating injustice. Since Islamic jurists saw the Constitutional Revolution as an action against the injustice and oppression of Qajar Kings, and at the same time, didn't consider the westernizers to be very powerful and influential, they believed that they could remove the minority westernizers from power after constitutional government was stabilized. Thus, they gave priority to controlling injustice, supporting the newly formed system. They believed that if they try to reform the system completely, they would never succeed, and large-scale revolutions resulting from such radical revolution would jeopardize Iran. Thus, they believed that they should gradually eliminate the problems by leading the Iranian people, as hasty and sudden measures would not lead to true reform and elimination of problems (Turkaman, 1985).

On the other side, there were religious scholars who gave priority to fighting westernization and misguided groups, as they believed that if westernizers could become powerful overtime by attracting Muslims who had not a strong faith, and thus, it would become hard to remove them from power (ibid). One of the most important weaknesses of constitutionalists was their lack of accurate knowledge of constitutional system, which was adapted from western system of government. Such weak point was the result of Iranian constitutionalists' lack of knowledge of western culture. Also, given the fact that Najaf was distant from the environments in which Constitutional Revolution was happening, especially, Tehran, Akhund Khorasani and his companions had to inform and instruct people through sending letters and telegraphs. This resulted in two problems: first their trusted liaisons (assuming good faith) analyzed the events from their own perspective; and second, telegraphs and letters were controlled by secret and over agents. However, in the process of constitutional developments, Najaf front, led by Akhund Khorasani, managed to obtain knowledge of western culture and civilization. In some of their letters, Akhund Khorasani and Akhund Mazandarani noted that some parts of the Europe had irreligious cultures, saying, "Parisians are known by Christians as people not obliged to laws and limits set by Christ" (Aghanajafi Ghuchani, 1999). They asked advocates of Parisian freedom to care about their own freedom and live alone Iranians. One of reasons for acceleration of Constitutional Revolution was serious breakage of ties between Najaf and Iran's event following death of Akhund Khorasani. Certainly, the constitutionalist group led by Akhund Khorasani didn't sought the western version of constitutionalism in which both king and religion were limited, and in which the social rules were enforced by the group who enact them, but rather, they only sought the form of constitutional government, so that they could use it to control intractable arbitrary actions of the king and the governors by impose Islamic laws on them, thus

providing for independence and promotion of Islamic community, social justice, and enforcement of all Islamic rulings. When criticizing Akhund Khorasan and his companions, the complex condition of those days, and the significant corruption in secular system of western governments today must be considered. If like Qom front, Najaf front had had a good knowledge of the West and its missionaries working in Iran, Constitutional Revolution could have taken another course. Akhund Khorasani could have established an Islamic government with a western form, as did the prominent jurist from Qom, Imam Khomeini, who used the form of Islamic Republic from the west to found a government with an Islamic content. However, factors like multiplicity of leaders in Akhund Khorasani's days, lower influence of Akhund Khorasani among people, compared with Imam Khomeini, and Najaf front being farther distanced from the environment where revolution occurred, compared with Qom front, and also, the extent to which Akhund Khorasani could use historical experiences, etc. caused Najaf front not be as successful as Qom front.

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