

Shiite Scholars in the Era of Constitutionalism and the Image of Western Domination

*Naser Jamalzadeh**

Abstract

This article is an interdisciplinary study of culture and politics that combines insights from political science and the concept of image in the discipline of culture and communication. Relying on various documents and secondary sources pertaining to the period of constitutional revolution in Iran, this article is an attempt to reconstruct the mental image that the Shiite scholars (Ulama) had of western political systems as well as their own government and society. Western domination and its cultural hegemony seemed to threaten Muslim societies including Iran due to western countries' superiority in science and technology. Perceptions of such an imminent danger created a particular image of the west in the minds of majority of Iranian political elite and Shiite scholars prompting them to join in one way or another the reform movement known as the constitutional movement towards saving Islamic culture and Iran from foreign invasion.

Keywords

image of western domination, Shiite scholars, constitutional movement, Tobacco Movement, mental image, political documents

* Associate Professor, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science, ISU
Jamalzadeh@yahoo.com

Introduction

Implementing reforms in government and attempts at overcoming backwardness as well as achieving progress and development like that of the western countries, have been the main concern of the political elites towards the end of the reign of the Qajar dynasty in Iran. The need for change and transformation in the structure of the political system, political authorities and the policies of government is the dominant mental image of elites including rulers, intellectuals and religious scholars in that era. This need is comprehensible and traceable through investigation of political documents survived from that time. The image that was created in the mind of the political elites in that period concerning the political structure, rule of law, progress and new technologies in western systems was not only an image of progress and development in the western world. Rather it heralded the probability of hegemony and domination of a foreign culture over the Iranian domestic culture. This sent a warning signal to the elites of the society that if they did not take notice and did not have a correct reaction, there would be nothing left of Iranian and Islamic culture to defend.

The feeling of backwardness and under-development vis-à-vis the west and the possibility of the imminent invasion of western civilization with the instruments of science and technology, before becoming a reality, occupied the minds of the political elite placing them in a position of weakness and passivity. Thus they had a strong feeling of the invasion of alien culture with all its human resources and modern instruments in the proximity of their traditional culture and religious borders. Therefore, they concluded that in order to forestall this cultural invasion and to immunize the religion and state of Iran against it, they must adopt the ways of western progress and development minus its culture by implementing reforms in western

process of development. Otherwise, the hegemony of the west in terms of culture and instruments both, would take place sooner or later. Implementation of governmental reforms during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah; and in a more extensive form, occurrence of the Constitutional Revolution at the latter part of the Qajar rule during the reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah were reformist actions that could be an answer to this mental challenge posed to the political elites. There were a wide diversity of views among the political elite concerning the nature of the constitutional system as a reformist solution and the possibility of its success in overcoming backwardness and despotism.¹ However, apart from these differences, the minimal common task of this movement was their tremendous efforts at rescuing Iran from backwardness and safeguarding the identity of the Iranian-Islamic culture from invasion of foreigners that could be regarded as the common aspect of this political action. This article is an interdisciplinary study in the field of culture and communications on the one side and political science on the other. Using the concept of image in the field of culture and communications, showing its relevance to the world of politics during the era of constitutionalism, and relying on existing political documents and analyzing their contents, the present article attempts to present a mental image of the Shiite scholars about the western systems and of the regime and society in which they were living.

Image of Western Hegemony and the Political Elite: Key Concepts

At the beginning we shall refer to what we mean by image. About the meaning of image, Hamid Mowlana writes:

“Image can be defined as a structure that involves a set of images of the various aspects of a reality which exist in the mind of the

individual. Image applies to a set of characteristics that a person recognizes or pictures in his mind.” (Mowlana, 1996, p.10).

In this study, by image is meant the political elite’s “mental image” of situation of their own era and especially, a picture of the reality of the west that has been sketched in their mind. This picture has either been created by the printed media such as books, publications and newspapers or through hearing and seeing those who had interacted with the western world in the position of businessmen, students or travelers and had communicated their observations and experiences; or a person as a resident or traveler to western countries had gained certain experiences that were influential in creation of this mental image.

Shiite scholars of the era of constitutionalism are a group of political elites whose mental image of the west is analyzed in this article. By Shiite scholars is meant those people who have been educated at the theological schools of Iraq and Iran wearing the garb of the clergy and analyzing the internal situation of the society or the international conditions of Iran from the viewpoint of religion. They are either proponents or opponents of certain political and social affairs as revealed in their writings or sermons. For instance, as a result of the interactions that they have had with society and different individuals or through books and magazines that they have had in their possession, Muslim scholars could have drawn their own mental image of the reality of the western world. Another point that is worth mentioning here is that in this study, the entire cross-section of Shiite scholars including authorities on religion who are to be followed by laymen, prominent scholars of religion and qualified jurists, preachers and orators have been analyzed. For this reason, the mental image of authorities on religion such as Mirza Shirazi and Akhund Khorasani, and of distinguished and outstanding religious scholars such as Mirza Naini and Aqa Nurullah Najafi are taken into

consideration. Another case study is the image of pragmatist scholars of religion -such as Seyyid Muhammad Tabatabai -who were closely involved in the Constitutional Movement and held similar opinions as authorities on religion in Najaf. The era of constitutionalism in this investigation embraces a greater time span than the time of Constitutional Revolution and encompasses the period towards the end of the Qajar reign i.e. from the time of boycott of tobacco during the rule of Naser al-Din Shah as well.

Here we are not like a researcher of communications who seeks to explain the role of media in image creation or drawing pictures for his own society or for different societies. Thus we are not to measure the impact of audio-visual media or print media in creating pictures of society. Neither do we intend to see whether the picture that the media presents to its audiences and the message it transmits to them is based on reality or is just a kind of false imaging with no semblance of reality. So we are not playing the role of Mowlana who attempts to show in his article on “Media and Image Creation” that how western media try to impose a tarnished image of the Muslim World and the Middle East in the mind of their western and even international audience by presenting images that are far from reality. For example, they introduce Muslims as being violent and being sponsors of terrorism so that nobody criticizes them when they take any action against Muslim world.

“The propaganda and undesirable commotion that the west has launched under the label of “fundamentalism”, “militarism” and “terrorism” against Islamic movements throughout the world since the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, has distressed public opinion in the west and especially in the United States and Europe... in general. It was under such superficial and false imagery conditions that the genocide took place in Bosnia against Muslims. It was not only the Serbs that were opposed to the idea of an Islamic republic in

Europe. Rather, the atmosphere of ill will that was created from under the ashes of the World War II and the Cold War became more so with the intense anti-Islamic campaign that was launched by the media – propaganda that caused anxiety in the west and profoundly influenced the policies of Washington, London, Paris and other European capitals.” (Mowlana, 1996, pp.11-12).

It was this same image creation by the media in the Gulf War, in the invasion of Afghanistan for fighting the terrorism of Taliban version of Islam or in the invasion of Iraq on the pretext of destroying mass destruction weapons for the reason that these weapons must not be placed at the disposal of terrorist Muslims. This is also the case for the intense media war that they have launched against Iran concerning the use of nuclear energy, terrorism and human rights in order to convince the public opinion of western countries that Muslims are indeed dangerous and must not possess advanced nuclear technology even for peaceful purposes.

What is important in this investigation is not emphasis on the impact of the role of television, radio or print media on the political elite of the constitutional era, nor do we aim to clarify the nature of the created image or picture in the minds of the political elite as to whether it conforms with the reality of the western world or it is simply an imaginary and distorted picture. Rather, we intend to show that the picture (image of hegemony of the west) that is imprinted in the minds of the political elite, the intellectuals, the political authorities and in particular, the Shiite scholars that are studied in this research, has been created either rightfully or wrongfully and has prevailed among them. One can come to know of this image from the surviving political writings or their political positions and actions. Here we are not concerned with the reason behind or questions related to the creation of the image of domination of the west in their minds. Rather, we aim to show this picture or image that is evident in their

writings and political actions. For example, we witness the existence of the image of hegemony of the west in a powerful form among the intellectuals of the constitutional era. In order to clarify the issue further, we quote an evidence from one of the works of Mirza Malcolm Khan who has been one of the most famous intellectuals of this era.

Malcolm's mental image of the west and western civilization is that of a sweeping flood that is gushing towards the eastern and Muslim nations including Iran and there is no way to scape. He believed that this flood would engulf the weak nations very soon writing:

“The outpouring of the power of Europe has made the survival of barbaric (not western) governments impossible. After this, the barbaric governments on earth must either be disciplined like the European governments or must be subjugated and be defeated by western power. The tide of this power is attacking by nature from around the world. The lowlands will be the first to be submerged. Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Japan, Kabul, Yankees land, the whole of India and all the islands of the world are subject to this flood.” (Malcolm Khan, n.d., p.95).

He then concludes that we do not have that strength to resist against this flood and writes:

“Now see how negligent we are that we aspire to repulse this world-wide flood with small power and knowledge we have. By God it is impossible; by God, it cannot be done. Either we must rise to the level of Europe in the course of the these coming years or regard ourselves as drowned and submerged in the flood of Europe right from now.” (Malcolm Khan, n.d., p.95).

We notice that in the opinion of Malcolm Khan only two or three years is the time left for catching up with Europe and thus saving Iran from the ravages of the tide of the west. He feels the danger to be so

close that he considers the time left for drawing level to be insufficient. A point worth mentioning here is that we are not attempting to reveal the western-orientation of Malcolm or to justify the backwardness of Iran. Rather, we wish to show the intensity of the image of hegemony of the west in the manner that Malcolm feels and is convinced of.

Therefore what is significant here is the result of the image of the hegemony of the west in the minds of the political elite that brings in its wake, either the interaction with or rejection of the west and its domination. It also becomes the source of the political action of the elite in either establishing a constitutional system or opposing it.

Perhaps the approach of this article is not far from another research project undertaken by Clarke and Mowlana about the political elite of Iran before the Revolution through analyzing the newspapers editorials. Writers of this research paper attempted to prove the point that the conception of Western Europe by the Iranian political elite itself reveals their own mental image and wanted to present a framework for understanding the national developments through analysis of the political stances and images existing in the press (Mowlana, 1992, pp.54-55).

In the present research we intend to show initially –regardless of the nature, the cause and the method of creation of the image of domination by the west- the existence of this image among the Shiite religious scholars relying on the written documents of the era of the Qajar dynasty and of the constitutional era. Thereafter, we intend to use it as a reason for their participation in the Constitutional Revolution which as a reformist action under their leadership could reduce their anxiety about backwardness and probable domination of the west over their destiny, culture and national resources.

According to the writer, occurrence of the Constitutional Revolution and change in the political structure of the regime from

absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy as well as the establishment of the legislature and new constitution in emulation of western systems, before its occurrence in the world of reality had been shaped in the minds of scholars as an accepted fact that would take place sooner or later. Thus the subjective revolution had occurred earlier than the objective one.

Before it was collapsed in action by the revolutionaries, the system of monarchy had come to an end and had died in the mind of the intellectuals, the scholars and even the political men. In theory, the bullet that Mirza Reza Kermani fired at Naser al-Din Shah towards the end of the reign of the Qajar dynasty resulting in his death was in fact the death of despotism and the political structure that sustained despotism i.e. the monarchy. Thus it was not much later that his son Muzaffar al-Din Shah was forced to accept the constitutional monarchy system.

Now in continuation of the article, we attempt to show the attitude of the Shiite scholars in relation to the situation of their own society and their mental image of their approved system of government and of western political systems that formed the source of their subsequent political behavior during the Constitutional Revolution.

Shiite scholars and the image of domination of the west

The mental image of the Shiite scholars -during the constitutional era -of western systems and their own circumstances was in a way that they felt the amazing progress that had taken place in western countries in the field of industry and technology was due to their governmental systems and the laws that existed there. Thus because of backwardness and the big gap between Iran and these countries, sooner or later there would be changes in the despotic system of government of Iran aimed at establishing law and order in line with the western countries. They believed that if the Iranians themselves

did not take a serious action and did not decide on bringing about change and overhaul in the regime towards progress of the state in conformity with their own religion and values, this task would be done by foreign enemies in which case, the foreigners change and overhaul would bring in its wake their colonial and cultural domination, and this would not be agreeable and favorable to any Iranian. However, if the Iranians themselves felt the need for change and take action towards this end by making appropriate laws that were in keeping with their religion, they would be able to liberate themselves from colonial domination before the European nations could enter the country by force and bring about changes in Iran conforming with their own culture and religion.

In order to reveal this mental image of the Shiite scholars about the west, we refer to the historical sources and documents in order to clarify the subject more, and –based on the available written texts– take a second look at the mindset of some of the prominent scholars about the west in the two periods before and after the Constitutional Revolution respectively.

1. Ayatullah Mirza Shirazi

Before the establishment of the constitutional monarchy during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah and after the death of Sheikh Murteza Ansari in 1912, the religious authority of Shiites was entrusted to Muhammad Hasan Huseini popularly known as ‘Mirza Shirazi’. The question of safeguarding the independence of the country from the hegemony of infidels and protecting the essence of the religion of Islam and Shiite school was a definite principle of concern for this religious authority of Shiites as well as for the rest of Shiite scholars both in Najaf and Iran. It is one of the most important of social obligations of Muslim society and is considered a duty of qualified Muslim jurists. The wars between Iran and Russia and the loss of

many Iranian cities as a result of the ignominious treaties of Golestan and Turkmenchay, the ever increasing interference of foreigners especially Russia and Britain in the internal affairs of Iran, and the granting of innumerable privileges to colonialist countries resulted in the creation of an image of incompetence of the Qajar rulers and kings in safeguarding the state in the minds of religious scholars and became the source of anti-colonial social risings in the ‘Tobacco movement’ and later on in the constitutional movement. This concern is evident before the constitutional movement in the letter credited to Seyyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi that was sent to Mirza Shirazi. It is said that this letter played some role in persuading Mirza to declare the boycott of tobacco.

“O! great leader (Mirza Shirazi): the king of Iran (Naser al-Din Shah) has become incompetent and of bad character... he has handed over the reins of government to a wicked, mean and evil man (Amin al-Sultan) who speaks ill of the prophets at public gatherings. However, what he has done to the detriment of Muslims is that he has sold the major part of the country and its income to the enemies... in general, this wicked man has auctioned Iran in this manner and is selling out the houses of the Prophet Muhammad (SA) and the Islamic state to the foreigners. However, because of his mean and lowly character, he is ready to sell off these things at a low price. O the leader of religion! If you do not rise to help the nation and do not rally them and do not liberate the country with your power from the clutches of this sinful man, it will not be long before the Islamic state is colonized by the foreigners (Davani, n.d., pp.83-8).

The ‘boycott of tobacco’ movement started on the basis of economic demands of tobacco traders, agents and businessman (Ashraf, 1980, p.110). However, gradually it was transformed into a religious demand and this anxiety spread among people and scholars that foreigners had arrived in order to convert us from our religion,

(Shaji'i, 1993, pp.115-116). Mirza Shirazi took on the leadership of this movement in order to defend the sovereignty of the Islamic state vis-à-vis domination by foreigners.

The image of domination over the Islamic state of Iran by foreigners and infidels had been well set in the mind of the prominent Shiite religious authority from the letters, notes and pleadings of people and scholars to Mirza Shirazi that had then reached to a crescendo. Sheikh Hasan Karbalai, a protégé of Mirza who has written the most important book recording the history of the tobacco movement, believes that those letters, notes and pleadings left no doubt in the mind of his holiness that the public outcry had left him with no alternative except issuing a firm decree banning tobacco use (Isfahani Karbalaie, 2003, p.135).

Considering the various demands made on him as a religious authority of Shiites, Mirza Shirazi was quite convinced of the colonial nature of those contracts and well aware that this sort of favors and grants would bring about the plunder of the country's resources by foreigners. So he saw no alternative except to take practical steps vis-à-vis the regime and the hegemony of foreigners. Thus the first step was the letter he wrote to Naser al-Din Shah in which he warned him of the consequences of contracts with foreigners and warned the heads and officials against the domination of the Islamic land by them.

“Although the supplicant has contented himself with the role of supplication and has not made any requests from His Majesty, we should take into consideration the news received of the occurrence of several incidents suggesting corrupt practices that are contrary to the laws of religion and rights of government. I would like to state that permission to foreign nationals to interfere in the internal affairs of the state, interact and socialize with Muslims, and implement banking, tobacco, railways affairs and other practices is in some respects directly in conflict with the Holy Quran and divine laws while being

harmful to the independence of the government, disturbing the public order, and causing wide-spread concern of the Iranian subjects... (Isfahani Karbalaie, 2003, p.102).

Therefore Mirza Shirazi was concerned about the interference of foreigners or, in his words, infidels in the economic and political affairs of the country resulting in the loss of independence of the state. He held that this contract and the ones similar to it would cause the infidels to gain control of the economic life and trade of the state, as a result of which the traders and people would lose their businesses, be enslaved by foreigners and subsequently vices and evils be wide spread causing them to turn their back on religious beliefs. This mental image can be observed clearly in the telegraphic message that Mirza sent to Naser al-Din Shah.

“Content with little benefit, he caused infidels to gain control of people’s economic life and trade so that they would interact and socialize with them out of urgency; and would become their servants out of fear or desire. Thus gradually vices become more prevalent and openly done, and little by little people’s beliefs are corrupted and the religion of Islam is eliminated from the life of people and Iranian Muslims would revert to their earlier infidelity... the subjects who in fact are the developmental assets of the government would completely lose the control they exercised over their business and trade and be dominated by infidels.” (Isfahani Karbalai, 2003, p.112).

Finally, Mirza Shirazi who failed to achieve his goals by means of advice, admonition and diplomacy and whose efforts were foiled by the Shah and Amin al-Sultan, faced no alternative except to issue the decree of the boycott of tobacco in order to cherish the rights of people and rescue the country from domination of foreigners. Thus in reply to seeking his legal opinion about the issue of tobacco wrote, “Today the use of tobacco and smoking whatsoever, is akin to engaging in a combat against the Savior of Mankind or the 12th Imam

(AS).” (Isfahani Karbalai, 2003 p.139). The ‘Fatwa’ that spread among the various strata of people, the Jews, Christians and even the royal court (Teimuri, n.d., p.108) and caused the Shah to retreat in the face of scholars and people (Sheykhi, 2000, p.33). This very image of domination of the west and the mental image of the scholars about domination of the Islamic state by foreigners continued to the Constitutional Movement which we shall discuss in subsequent chapters.

2. Ayatullah Muhammad Kazim Khurasani

The second document which clearly shows the mental image of the Shiite scholars reflecting their anxiety concerning the probability of domination of the Islamic states by the west and, despite its brevity, is extremely expressive is the statement attributed to Mulla Kazim Khurasani, one of the prominent religious authorities of Shiites and a supporter of constitutionalism in Najaf. We have extracted this quotation from the discussions of Ayatullah Muhammad Husein Naini in the book “Tanbih al- Ummah wa Tanzih al-Milla.” In this document Akhund Khurasani has compared western civilization to a sweeping flood that is flowing from the western countries towards the Islamic states. For this reason, he argues, the scholars of Islam must bring about changes as quickly as possible in the system of government and country in order to prevent the total obliteration of their religion and country, and be able to control the flood coming from the west. The text in question is as follows:

“This enormous flood of human civilization that is rushing down from the western world towards Islamic states, if we- the heads of Islam- do not take preventive measures and do not implement the civilization of Islam at the proper time, the basis of Islamism and Muslim culture will gradually be obliterated as a result of this enormous flood (Naini, 1982, p.83).

The above document towards understanding the mental attitude of Akhund Khurasani – that has also been the mental image of the majority of the Shiite scholars in those days – is a clear picture he presents to us of his analysis of western civilization and the domestic situation and circumstances prevalent in that period. We shall make use of some of those materials in our discussion.

Firstly, in Akhund's opinion, the western civilization- equipped with science and technology as well as intellectual achievements that are utilized for the foundation of human civilization- is gushing like a flood towards Islamic countries including Iran. Thus this flood originating from the west is an imposed fact that will come for sure and there is no way to escape from it. Secondly, this flood will have devastating repercussions one of the most important of which being the destruction of the foundations of Islamism and civilization of Islam. Thirdly, this flood has affected the Islamic countries because the laws of Islam have not been implemented in a perfect manner in their societies, and Muslims have been negligent of this point. However, the west has laid the basis of its laws on Islam and has practiced them.² (Naini, p.1). For this reason, their countries have developed whereas the Islamic countries have lagged behind in science. Fourthly, in order to prevent the total annihilation of Islamic civilization and religion, the solution is that the scholars of Islam think of a way out. They should adopt-based on the temporal requirements- certain concepts of western theories that do not clash with religiosity of Muslims and bring about changes in their regimes. The purpose is to repulse the all-out attack of western civilization that is harmful to the country and the Shiite school, while making use of their positive aspects that are beneficial to the country and the religion towards satisfying the welfare of the society. The late Akhund Khurasani in the fourth clause of his treatise "Letter of Advice" that he sent to the young king- Muhammad Ali Shah³- (Naini, pp.192-193) asks him: to

endeavor in making progress in science and industry, and seek assistance of advanced countries towards bringing about the progress and development of the state and self sufficiency of Iranian people without help from foreigners. He writes:

“Endeavor to expand and to develop the modern sciences and industries; and know that the cause of progress and happiness of the rest of nations and that which has raised them to the pinnacle of glory, is the acquisition of new sciences and industries. Unfortunately, the backwardness that is now witnessed in Iran and has made the country poor and afflicted to this great extent, is the consequence of the indifference of our past generations to these issues. Their illogical appetite for foreign imported goods has caused this chronic disease to infect the rest of the individuals of the country. Now, the existence, revival and modernization of Iran depend on the implementation of this important point (Namdar, 1997, pp.192-193).

3. Seyyid Muhammad Tabatabai

We get an impression of the imminent changes and reforms as well as the image of domination of the west in a more explicit form in the letter that Seyyid Muhammad Tabatabai – a cleric leader during the constitutional movement in Tehran – had written to Ayn al-Dowla before the greater migration and issuance of the order of constitutional monarchy, which reveals the mental image he had of the situation and circumstances of his era. Addressing Ayn al-Dowla, he writes:

“... All these reforms depend solely on establishing a legislative assembly, unity between the government and the nation, and between government authorities and religious scholars. These reforms shall be implemented in the near future but we want it to be implemented by our own king and our own minister and not by Russia, Britain and the Ottomans. We do not want it to be written in pages of history that the government was toppled at the time of Muzaffar al-Din Shah and that

Iran had lost everything during the reign of that king...” (Kasravi, 1984, p.81).

These words like a transparent mirror reflect the image of domination of the west in the mind of a constitutionalist leader who focuses on the danger of fall of regime in Iran and the implementation of reforms at the hands of foreign governments such as Russia, Britain and the Ottoman Empire. To rid Iran of this situation, he has requested for establishment of a legislature according to the principles of the Shiite school. In another letter that he has written in the same period to Muzaffar al-Din Shah, he once again has warned against this danger and spoken of the danger of the humiliation of Muslims and weakening of Islam.

“Now if this situation is not improved, this country will in the near future become a part of foreign states. Of course, His Majesty will not be pleased that in the pages of history it would be written that during the reign of his monarchy, Iran had lost its sovereignty; that Islam had been weakened and Muslims had been humiliated.” (Kasravi, 1984, p.86).

4. Ayatullah Mirza Husein Naini

Ayatullah Mirza Husein Naini was another religious scholar of Najaf and an outstanding pupil of Akhund Khurasani during the constitutional era who devoted his book “*Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih al-Milla*” to reforming the regime and the society in Iran as well as showing the features of the despotic Qajar monarchy and explaining the principles of Islamic constitutionalism. Like his other contemporaries such as Akhund and Seyyid Muhammad Tabatabai who rose actively and practically in defense and support of constitutional monarchy, he too was deeply perturbed by the possibility of foreign domination of the country and was afraid of the hegemony of westerners over the Islamic state –the image governing

the minds of all religious scholars. Writing this book, he took a theoretical step towards endorsement of the constitutional system and denunciation of absolute monarchy. Stating the reason for his preference of constitutional monarchy over the system of absolute monarchy-that clearly shows his mental image of the west, he writes:

“Considering the attempts by the southern and northern neighbors in planning the division of the country (Iran) between themselves, and observing the numerous examples of these attempts, it is quite evident that change in the system of usurping monarchy from the former absolute tyranny to a latter one based on justice (constitutional monarchy), shall result in sustaining the Islamic religion and safeguarding the Muslim subjects from subjugation by infidels, in addition to fulfilling all above-mentioned conditions. Thus, this change will be among the most important religious obligations (Naini, 1982, p.50).

By paying close attention to these words we observe that Naini was apprehensive of the domination by infidels over the Islamic state and the extermination of the foundations of religion and piety by the great powers of that period namely Russia and Britain that he refers to them as the southern and northern neighbors in the aforesaid writing. Thus he pursued the idea of change in the despotic Qajar monarchy into a constitutional monarchy system as a solution for salvation of the country from the control of foreigners and protection of Islam and the Muslims. For this reason he considers it as the most important religious obligation, for according to his viewpoint, being under the domination of despotism was equal to giving up independence and Islamic identity -what had occurred in other Islamic states such as in Africa and some other Islamic countries. He holds that if Iranians do not come to their senses and do not wake up from the slumber of negligence and do not liberate themselves from the bondage and subjugation of their tyrannical kings, they would suffer the same

things that those above mentioned countries had done i.e. they would lose both their religion and their independence. He writes:

Should the Muslims (Iran) not be awakened from this negligence and accept the humiliation of keeping obedient to the pharaohs of the nation and the plunderers of the state, it shall not be too long that- God forbid- like the Muslims of large parts of Africa and most of the countries of Asia and so forth, they would lose the blessing of dignity and honor of independence of the nation and the rule of Islam, becoming captives in the hands of the Christian rulers. It shall not be too long that -like the inhabitants of Andalusia and other countries, their Islam changes to Christianity, their mosques to churches, their “Azan” -call to prayer -is transformed to the sound of church bells, and their Islamic rituals to girdles. Even their language would be converted to Christians tongue, and the holy shrine of the Eighth Imam shall be trampled upon by Christians (Naini, pp.49-50).

In the above mentioned words, preoccupation of the mind of Naini with the image of domination by the west is quite obvious. He is anxious about the Shiite Muslim country falling into the hands of infidels and atheists, and about the foundations of Islam being in danger. He considers the root cause of this danger facing Islamic societies including Iran to be the presence of despotic regimes in these countries and lack of implementation of the social principles of Islam. Naini believes that at the dawn of Islam, the thing which played a big part in its progress and influence in less than half a century was the implementation of the Islamic principles of freedom and equality. At that time, each Muslim individual was equal and on par with their caliphs and rulers, but gradually the Muslims were trapped by tyrannical and oppressive kings, forgetting these basic and fundamental principles of Islam i.e. equality and freedom –hence being subjugated and enslaved by tyrannical kings. However, unfortunately, in the contemporary era, Christian countries have

seized this principles from us and implemented them, thus getting able to bring Islamic countries under their control one after another. He writes:

“All politicians and those knowledgeable about the situation of the world, whether Muslims or non-Muslims, believe that the natural cause of the great progress and influence of Islam in its earlier days – that in less than half a century it had such a great spread and following – is the just and consultative nature of the Islamic government, freedom of individual Muslims and their equality with the caliphs and their confidants or consultants in rights and rulings. Likewise, the natural origin of the present decadence of Muslims and the domination of the Christians over them, that enabled them to colonize most of Muslim states and it is quite likely that they would colonize the remaining minor states, is the captivity and subjugation of Muslims under the tyrannical governments inherited from Muawiya and Christians success in adapting their rule on the basis of the Islamic Law (Naini, p.49).

It is clear that Naini considers the reason of domination of Muslim societies by westerners to be their implementation of religious principles of Muslims and the negligence of Muslims about their own religious principles. For this reason, he mentions repeatedly the point that “They have returned to us the very thing that we had in our possession” in his book (Naini, p.60). Likewise, the prominent religious authorities who were in favor of constitutional monarchy such as Akhund Khorasani and Mazandarani have emphasized in their commentaries on Naini’s book “*Tanbih al-Ummah...*”, the derivation of the principles and foundations of constitutionalism from Islam (Naini, p.1).

Commenting on the perception of Naini and other religious authorities of Najaf about the principles of western constitutional systems and their comparison or similarity with the practices of the

holy prophet of Islam (SA), the Infallible Imams (AS) and the caliphs in the early days of Islam, we should say that comparison of the progress, advancement and influence of Muslims in other states at the advent of Islam with those of westerners and Christians in the current era is an incorrect comparison and irrelevant analogy since it arises from their optimistic view towards western systems. The behavior of the Holy prophet of Islam (SA), the Infallible Imams (AS) and the caliphs in the early days of Islam based on justice, equality and freedom has been interpreted as the main cause of progress and influence of Islam in other states such as Iran and Byzantine. However, the conquest of Islamic countries by western Christians right from African and Asian countries and stretching up to Andalusia and other states was not because of their implementation of the principles of equality and freedom. Rather, it was because of their colonial nature that enabled them to misuse the ignorance of Muslims and their subjugation at the hands of the tyrannical and oppressive rulers and to gain control of their governments and economic resources i.e. their political affairs and their economy. In other words, at the advent of Islam, Islamic morality or moral behavior of Muslim rulers resulted in expansion and spread of Islam in other territories. In the present era, it was not this implementation of equality and freedom in the western constitutional systems that resulted in the conquest of Muslim countries and territories by westerners. Rather, it was the colonial power of theirs, the ignorance of Muslims and the tyrannical kings who ruled over them that altogether caused western powers to extend their domination over Muslim societies. In fact, the souvenir that the west brought for Muslim societies was freedom from religion, not freedom from bondage of oppressive regimes as the religious scholars wrongly thought. They had thought if constitutional systems and laws of the west were imported, they would bring about progress and people would be liberated from the chains of despotism.

Perhaps this wrong application of concepts- that scholars would for instance compare the western concept of equality with equity or *Musawat* in Islam, or that of the western legislative assembly with the principle of consultation in Islam, or expressions they would use such as “They have returned to us the very thing which we ourselves possessed”-is because of the historical mindset of Muslim scholars and people so that they would interpret the new western concepts in the context of their traditional, religious and native culture, not in conformity with the historical setting of these concepts in western culture. Mashaallah Ajudani explains this historical mindset as follows:

“People who were the organizers of the associations (constitutionalism) comprehended –based on their historical mentality and more important, on their linguistic verbal experience- those concepts in a manner that was in line with their own mindset... with their own mind, tongue and culture. When Iranians faced with these new concepts, since they lacked the linguistic and historical context of these concepts, they would understand, interpret and reconstruct them in keeping with their own historical understanding, interpretation and conception as well as their own linguistic experience. They would attempt to reduce the peculiarity of those new concepts by turning them into familiar concepts or adapting them to his own knowledge, thus presenting them in a familiar form. It was in the process of this familiarization or customization that “freedom of speech and expression” was easily interpreted as the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil; and more importantly, the basis of constitutionalism and even democracy was interpreted as the Quranic teaching in Sura 42, verse 38 “their affair being council between them.” (Ajudani, 2003, pp.8-9).

5. Seyyid Nasrullah Taqavi

Another constitutionalist scholar whose image of the western systems we shall study is Seyyid Nasrullah Taqavi. Stating that Islam was not in danger in the past, he views Islam at his time as being threatened because of the specific conditions of the time and the danger of the enemies of Islam whom he calls “civilized and awakened governments”, and is convinced that establishing a constitutional system and a consultative assembly will result in preservation of the basis of Islam and salvation of the country from lawlessness. He believes that if such an action is not taken, one must look forward to the disintegration of the country by the colonial powers. Thus, we observe the image of domination of the west prevailing in the mind of this man of religion. He states:

“There is a big difference between the present and the past. In the past, the principles of religion were safe from incidents of weakening, decline and the probability of extinction. Thus there was no powerful cause for demanding fundamental rights of people and involving in similar affairs. However, today, in reality, the demand of national consultative assembly -though having innumerable advantages-, involves the greatest benefit for faithful Muslims, i.e. safeguarding the basis of religion. If any person takes a slight look out of this country, he will come to know of the new situation in the world. He will know with this all-out endeavor- that the civilized and awakened governments are making towards bringing about changes everywhere especially in their neighbors- it is impossible that they will let this country with these confused relations remain in its present lawlessness and spoiled condition. They would refuse to recognize it as an exception to the rule of law and public rights. It is agreed upon by governments and big powers that the lawless country must not be left on its own. Rather, if they see the way of domination of any powerful

government open to such a state, they would arrive at a consensus to consider the latter as a lawful and legitimate victim of the former.” (Taqavi, 1995, pp.263-364).

The image of domination of Islamic states including Iran by the west in this document too -like in other documents -is quite revealing. The document suggests the same mentality which is that of fear of domination by westerners and of a prompt action to prevent the destruction of the Islamic country. Therefore, for liberation from domination of foreigners, Taqavi presents a number of proposals. The first proposal is to surrender totally to the westerners and welcome them in which case, as he states, “they will put the chain of subjugation and bondage round our necks. In this case, It is obvious that in addition to the shame and disgrace that will be brought on us until the Day of Judgment, we shall lose the honor of religious privilege as well.” (Taqavi, 1995, p.264). Apart from this, when the foreigners begin to dominate us, “we also cease to have the advantages that we now have due to the independence of our government” (Taqavi, 1995, p.264). In that case, we shall not be able to prevent vices and evils from occurring. The second is to allow “immoral communities and deviant groups to take over, and snuff out the whole government and nation” (Taqavi, 1995, p.265). In this case, the least they would do is to “convert the religion” (Taqavi, 1995,p.265). The third is that we allow “the enemies of religion and nation-who are seeking to exterminate any name and sign of religion and religious rituals from the face of the earth- to assume the power.” (Taqavi, 1995, p.265). The fourth is to let the scholars to adopt certain institutions of western civilization such as constitution and the parliament -that are in the interest of the religion and the state- and thereby attempt to preserve the state and save it from lawlessness. Thus western countries will not view us with humiliation. Furthermore, we will safeguard our religion as well as the

independence of our state. We quote Taqavi's own words about the final and desirable solution as follows:

“The fourth is acting in the same way that the scholars have done with all the diversity they have had in their dispositions and approaches. The truth of religion and its pure essence has become their motive and turned their hearts to some extent to their objective. In spite of all dangers, they have come to the point to request His Majesty -after providing the background for the union between government and nation-to establish a legislative assembly respecting religious rules towards safeguarding the interests and supporting the rights of both parties. They must continue not to allow the necessary reforms to be undertaken without the attention and approval of the elected representatives of the nation. It is evident that if such a thing happens, then neither will other governments be able to look at us and deal with us with humiliation on the pretext of lawlessness and anarchy- what they do with communities outside the civilized circle- nor will there be any room for the deviant religious groups to penetrate into religious leaders and government authorities, and have ill intentions about the nation and the government.” (Taqavi, 1995, p.265).

Therefore, based on this conviction, Taqavi attempts to send Iran out of the ranks of backward nations by presenting a proposal of reforming the government based on temporal requirements and Shiite rules, placing it in the ranks of civilized nations, hence preserving Islam and the country and immunizing them against the domination of deviant groups.

6. Aqa Nurullah Najafi Isfahani

We also observe this mental image of the scholars in the treatise “Resident and Traveler” of Aqa Nurullah Najafi Isfahani who is afraid of the domination of the Islamic land of Iran by foreigners. He wants

change and reform in society for protection of the country from the yoke of colonialists. He writes:

“Is it the decree of Islam that Muslims should suffer all sorts of injustice and all sorts of tyrannies? Should they remain silent so that Islam is exterminated? Should they relax so that foreigners occupy Islamic states with political devices? Should one hear the cry of the oppressed and not heed it or the Muslims must become humiliated and demeaned while the Shiite community and sovereignty is lost. Should the Islamic rules be abrogated and the laws of Europe be gradually put into practice? No man of religion will deliver such a verdict (Najafi Isfahani, 1995, p.445).

In this treatise, Aqa Najafi points to a verdict of the jurists of Najaf in which they have asked people and scholars of Iran to safeguard the basis of constitutionalism and to resist vis-à-vis the tyrants and foreigners. It has reiterated that if the zealous Iranian nation continue to remain silent and patient, it will not be long before-God forbid-the mosques of Islam and the dome and shrine of the Eighth Imam of the Shiites (AS) shall fall into the hands of the infidels (Najafi Isfahani, 1995, p.453).

Like other scholars, he also considers the solution of saving the country from the hands of foreigners and safeguarding Islam to lie solely in constitutionalism of the government and writes:

“Today the safeguarding of Islam depends solely on making the monarchy constitutional. The demands of time, power of the opponents of the government, our weakness and thousands of other untold facts- that are known to authorities on social and political affairs -all require that it is impossible for the nationality and sovereignty of a small group of Shiites to survive except by adopting a constitutional government. If a government, however small and humble, accepts getting civilized by becoming either a constitutional

monarchy or a republic, then it will be safe and no powerful government can trespass on it.” (Najafi Isfahani, 1995, p.446-447).

7. Sheikh Esmail Mahallati

Sheikh Esmail Mahallati was another constitutionalist scholar who enjoyed the support of the scholars of Najaf. In his treatise entitled “*al-La’ali al-Marbutah fi Wujub al-Mashrutah*” that he has written in defense of constitutional monarchy, he displays this mental image of the western systems. He considers establishing a constitutional system and supporting it as defending the sovereignty of the Islamic state against foreign domination and writes:

“Suddenly you get up and find the nation and the honor of the state all gone; you see kind and compassionate neighbors attacking Muslims like the rushing of ants and locusts without any commotion or any war, hammering the flag of the red cross in place of the lion and sun banner with absolute power and arrogance, and sounding church bells throughout the state of Islam. The intellectuals of the state and the politicians of the nation after realizing this deviation in religious and worldly affairs -which was a requirement of involvement of government administration in endless sensual pleasures-started to motivate the general population, and take preventive measures. They wanted... the powers of the monarchy and the excesses of the administration to be reduced from infinite level to finite one establishing a limit for them so that they would not lead to aforesaid corruptions, and the Islamic state would not be sold at a low price (Mahallati, 1995, pp.500-501).

We confine ourselves to this amount of testimonies and instances in order to reveal the mental image of scholars about the situation of the society in which they were living and the deep anxiety that they had of the domination of Iran by foreigners. Undoubtedly, one can present a large number of testimonies to prove this claim, but what

was said is sufficient to show that the image of domination of the west was one of the main concerns of Shiite scholars towards the end of the Qajar reign and in the course of the Constitutional Revolution. This fact can justify their supporting and accompanying the Constitutional movement.

Conclusion

This article sought to show the presence of a picture (image) of the likely domination of Iran by westerners in the minds of the Shiite scholars of the Constitutional era, an image that was common among them. Since it was widespread among the various political elite and especially Shiite scholars, this image was such a powerful one that it resulted in scholars' participation- right up to the level of religious authorities- in the social campaigns and movements such as the Tobacco campaign and the Constitutional Movement, or even conversely and based on a different analysis, it came to a sharp contrast with the philosophy of constitutionalism.

Notes

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1. Whether establishing a constitutional system in Iran was the solution for rescuing Iran from backwardness and a beginning for progress and development was an issue that had largely divided the political elite of the constitutional era so that they could be divided into supporters and opponents of constitutionalism. At the same time, supporters of constitutionalism themselves were also divided into two groups i.e., supporters of constitutionalism and supporters of legislative religious constitutionalism.
 2. In a commentary on Naini's book "Tanbih al-Ummah..." Akhund Khurasani has laid emphasis on the derivation of the principles of Islamic constitutionalism from Islamic sources.
 3. History of compilation of the treatise "Letter of Advice" by Akhund Khurasani is not exactly clear, but certainly it has been written in the second wave of constitutionalism and at the beginning of the reign of Muhammad Ali Shah Qajar i.e. either towards the end of 1945 or the beginning of 1946. Later on this treatise was printed in the year 1949 in the second volume of the magazine "Al-Irfan" in Arabic in Najaf. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Arabic

version along with its Persian translation was printed in a book entitled "A Death in the Light"(in Persian) by Mr. Abdul Husein Majid Kafai who was one of the relatives of Akhund Khurasani. Quoted from Muzaffar Namdar: *An Approach towards the Foundations of Shiite Schools and Political Movements in the Contemporary Century*, Tehran: Human Sciences and Cultural Studies Research Institute, 1997, p.152.

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