Bolsheviks, Iran’s Communist Party, and the Jungle Movement in Guilan

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INTRODUCTION

Initiated by MirzaKoochak Khan, the Jungle Movement was one of the most significant of Iranian sociopolitical movements within the Constitutional years to Reza Khan Empowerment time span. This movement encountered different stages within the years 1915 up to 1921, the most important of which were the domestic disintegrations, on the one side, and increasing political permeation of foreign powers, on the other. This disorder, which overwhelmed almost all the country, was a result of non-fulfillment of the Constitution’s demands and expectations. In the other words, the Constitutional Revolution could not achieve its various aims that it determined to arrive at right from the scratch. Soon after, signs of failure—which were coming into sight in the turbulent post-Revolution years—appeared. In this sociopolitical hotchpotch, a movement was close to shape in northern Iran: Jungle Movement. It determined its main purpose fulfillment of the Constitution’s ideals. One of the most important issues in the Jungle Movement and its ultimate is the involvement of Iran’s Communist Party, which was formed in 1920 in Bandar Anzali. It adjoined the Jungle Movement in its final year and left a great influence thereupon. Communist Party was closely associated with the Russian Government, from which it received its main courses of action.

Jungle Movement as Leader of Defense from Constitutional Revolution

Jungle Movement was a product of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905) and displayed stubborn protection against its ideals and purposes. The Constitutional Revolution was also a reaction against both internal and external challenges faced by Iran, promising freedom, justice, and law.

While internal challenges were of multiple branches, they shared a common characteristic: backwardness and political, economic, and cultural underdevelopment. In the political arena, Iran lacked a powerful central government. In spite of the fact that Qajar kings assumed the governance of the state, their authority was solely limited to Tehran and its surroundings. They ruled the country in an absolute arbitrary and selfish manner, regarding themselves to be beyond all laws and confinements. All their concern was their personal welfare and amassing wealth. In other regions of the state, also, local governors followed a similar way. In such a situation, bring up any talk of political accountability and oversight of the government was too strange and bizarre[1]. Unfortunately, economic area was no better than its political counterpart: a major part of people’s income was snatched from their pockets to be settled to the rulers’ vaults. Many Iranian industrialists and merchants were bankrupted as a result of importations of foreign products. Iranians, in the cultural stadium, felt humiliation and disgrace due to invalidation of their values and ideals.
In the foreign dimension, the main challenge came from presence of English and Russian forces in Iran and transformation of this country into their sphere of influence: Russians in northern Iran and Englishmen in southern parts. Foreigners dealt with Iranians as second-rank citizens. Considered together, these issues provoked an outburst by different social classes and strata against the status quo. Repercussion of this outburst was the Constitutional Revolution.

Noteworthy among these was the acquaintance of Iranians with European advancements and renovations, which played a large-scale role in giving hope to Iranians in changing the present status.

There are two main viewpoints on the European developments that belong to two classic sociologists: Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx believed that the major reasons for advancements of the European societies are capitalism and the bourgeois class, which, as he compared, was similar to a conjurer who creates unbelievable handworks with special methods and techniques.[2]

Another analysis on the advancements of European societies belongs to Weber, who tried to adjust the Marxists’ one-way emphasis on economy, underlining the role of cultural factors. However, Weber had a perpetual emphasis that culture is not a causal and one-way factor for development[3]. Frank Parkin, one of the major interpreters of Weber’s texts, stresses that Weber, in his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, offers implications of both interpretations: influence on the culture and interactions of culture and economics. Although, Parkin emphasizes that the right interpretation is dealing with the interactions of culture and economics on development ground[4].

Iranians had only a nodding acquaintance with transitions of European societies and modernism, a delayed acquaintance as a result of Europeans’ military invasions to Iran with no cultural and philosophical bases. Thus, the adoptions thereof were by and large unsuccessful.

In their international competitions, England and Russia changed Iran into a competition venue. This gave northern Iran to Russia and southern Iran to England. These ledowns shocked Iranians and instigated them to take countermeasures.

The ways suggested for playing catch-ups were frequently emphasizing on rehabilitation of military forces and modern equipments—all doomed to failure albeit. The last of these unsuccessful tries was the Constitutional Revolution, which not only failed to realize Iranians’ demands and ideals, but also made some key aggravations. John Foran describes post-Constitution Iran as follows:

In 1914, northern Iran was part of the Russian emperorship, whose consulates ruled Iran instead of the local government. In the south, Englishmen had made collaborations with Sheikh Khazal, governor of Khuzestan, to assure their control over oil fields. Iranian government was extremely weak in that time.

Heads of tribes and elders of landowners were absolute superintendents of their jurisdiction. Aggressive armies looted agricultural and livestock products. The peasantry were forced to servitude and road-building. The Constitutional Revolution was seized by the advocates of the status quo and all hopes of change were awfully pale.[5].

Under these conditions, various uprisings and revolts came into sight in every nook and corner of Iran to support the Revolution’s purposes, one of the most conspicuous of which was the Jungle Movement led by MirzaKoochak Khan.

Iran’s Status on the Verge of Jungle Movement

Disintegration of internal circumstances, together with English and Russian pressures, was the most important characteristic of Iran in the years ending in the Jungle Movement. A couple of years ago, in 1912, the National Legislative Assembly was inaugurated in the middle of people’s great enthusiasm. The Assembly gave vote of confidence to Sepahdar Government and SardarAsad, sent the former king to Europe with definite stipend, and appreciated internal and external fighters[6]. The Second Assembly also took precious steps to improve the state’s circumstances—with little success, however. In the mid 1913, Assembly Representatives divided into two competitive groups and the state confronted with tribal antagonisms. These weakened the central government. In addition to such internal problems, English and Russian forces were starting to march down northern and southern cities of Iran in 1913.

After seizure of Rahst and Anzali, Russia gave to Iran a three-articled ultimatum, which demanded: (1) disposal of the American advisor Morgan Shuster who had made chief financial improvements in Iran; (2) prevention of employment of any foreign advisor without taking the prior permit of England and Russia; and (3) reimbursement of indemnification to Rahst and Anzali-settled Russian forces. They threatened to occupy Tehran in case their demands are not realized within 48 hours. Ultimately, the Minister Samsam al-Dowleh accepted the Russian demands, dissolving the Second Assembly. Russian measures, however, did not remain unanswered and provoked intense Iranian oppositions. Abreast with popular oppositions in Najaf, Tehran, Karbala, Shiraz, Tabriz, and Mashhad, confiscation of foodstuffs by the Russian forces engendered a bloody agitation in Rasht and Anzali, where 43 persons were killed and more than 50 ones injured[6]. In fact, the state was close to surrender against the bleary future of foreign seizures and domestic stagnation in 1915 on the verge of Jungle Movement[7]. Under such sociopolitical disorders, the MirzaKoochak Khan-led Jungle Movement incepted aimed at helping the country out of this terrible conditions. The main point in evolution of this Movement and
the purposes thereof (such as fighting with aliens and maintenance of state’s independence that can be referred to as the main reasons for the Movement) had its roots in English and Russian dominance over Iran and their mutual competitions.

MirzaKoochak Khan and Inception of Jungle Movement

Son of MirzaBozorg, Yoones, known as MirzaKoochak, was in 1880 born in a middleclass family in Ostad Sara locality, Rasht. He studied theology in Rasht and Tehran, but withdrew studying with the initiation of Constitutional Revolution and adjoined fighters and revolutionaries. MirzaKoochak played a role in conquest of Qazvin and Tehran and fighting with Mohammad Ali King Qajar, the deposed king who decided to return to Iran to take back throne [8].

Mirza went to Tehran after defeat of Mohammad Ali. He came in contact with some heads of Islam Alliance-associated National Party. Islam Alliance was allegedly an Istanbul-based organization, which was founded by some religious leaders such as Seyyed Jamal al-Din, AbdorahmanKavakebi, Rashid Reza, and Mohammad Abdeh. Much like Bani-Abbas headers and caliphates, this organization intended to gather Muslims under a united lattice in order to fight with colonization and create a global, political weight for the Islam World. Seyyed Mohammad Reza Mosavat, Seyyed Mohammad Kamarei, and SoleymanEskaandari were some known Iranian politicians and pastors who were members of this organization [8]. Another branch of Islam Alliance was established in Rasht, in which some religious leaders were members [9].

MirzaKoochak Khan conversed with men of religion and politics in Tehran. Some members of National Party were advocates of taking a middle path, while many of them emphasized upon armed resistance and extreme actions. The outcome resulting from all consultations was that a permanent center against the aliens can definitely assuage pressures. MirzaKoochak volunteered in translating this aim into reality. He travelled to Mazandaran accompanied by one of the Constitution fighters, Mirza Ali Khan Dvissalar, who, since he was a native boy, believed that Mazandaran’s voluminous jungles were easier and quicker to make fighting preparations. However, MirzaKoochak Khan’s breakaway from Dvissalar and his meeting with Heshmat, a physician in Lahijan, indicate that the two companions disagreed over this matter: MirzaKoochak considered as more suitable the aggregation of National Party members in Guilan. The first session of Islam Alliance was surreptitiously held in Rasht in 1915, whose members were determined to partisan warfare. A group headed by MirzaKoochak Khan and Dr. Heshmat set off for Toolem Jungles.

Woodlanders did not confine their aims and purposes to a limited collection of social, political, and economic thoughts, but they placed such slogans as disposal of alien forces, provision of security, obviation of injustice, and fight with tyranny as their main lines of business. What the woodlanders themselves have articulated on their ideology is: “We, before anything, are defenders of Iran’s independence, a genuine and unabridged independence with not the least intervention of foreign governments; we work for installing the basic reformations in the country and obviation of governmental corruptions as the origins of all calamities. We preserve unity of all Muslims. Having these aims in mind, we invite all Iranians to contribute to our shared causes [8].

There were few veteran fighters among Jungle leaders who had experience in international policy too. Even MirzaKoochak Khan was solely a religious man who gazed at all revolution windows with a religion-oriented eye. He was an idealist Iranian and a wholehearted religious man. Mirza never missed saying a single prayer and/or one fasting. He was deeply in fond of Ferdowsi’s poems and used to arrange regular Shahnameh readings and sessions to excite the fighters’ bravery sensations in GoorabZormokh, the center of the Jungle’s military facilities.

Jungle Movement; from the Onset to Entrance of Communist Party to Iran

The Jungle Movement may, in political and military respects, be divided into two periods:

1. The period starting with MirzaKoochak Khan’s departure to Guilan (1915) and ending in stoppage of Jungle oppositions.

The first base for partisan warfare was Toolem jungle, in which a local landowner granted a land to the Islam Alliance and Mirza’s companions. After deep investigations, Mirza chose GoorabZormokh as the center of the Jungle’s military facilities. 1917 Russian Revolution compelled Russian forces, who were trying to suppress MirzaKoochak Khan’s actions in Guilan, to return back to their country. In July 1917, the Russian Government ordered its armed forces located in northern Iran to come back, who returned within two months from Qazvin to Anzali and then to Caucasus. Under an agreement between woodlanders and Russian forces, this transportation was peacefully done, after which Rasht came wholly in hands of the Jungle leaders. Exodus of Russian forces enabled Englishmen to increase their activities in Caucasus, the locality which was teemed with mines and oil extraction companies. Albeit Jungle fighters tried to resist against them and this provoked a conflict between the two sides. After a period of quarrel, woodlanders demanded a truce, which was admitted by the English side.

After conclusion of the First World War in 1918, English government made attempts to take full control of Iran with the help of Vosoogh Aldoleh, the newly appointed prime minister of Iran. 1919 Contract was concluded, subsequently. To achieve this goal, Jungle Movement ought to be wiped away. Vosoogh Aldoleh
sought to allure Mirza and Jungle leaders by giving definite promises to grant Guilan’s governance to Mirza should he surrenders. Mirza rejected this proposal and this intensified English pressures on Jungle leaders. With the increase of military pressures, some Jungle leaders (like Ahmad Kasmaei) requested immunity from Vosogho Aldoleh and surrendered. This incident gave rise to major financial, military, and organizational rifts within the Jungle leaders. Moreover, Kasmaei’s surrender caused dissolution of Islam Alliance, which played no more roles in the Jungle Movement thereafter.

2. The period starting with the advent of Russian Red Army to Bandar Anzali in1920 and ending in the military failure of Jungle Movement, concomitant with English-Soviet Union agreement about the invasion of central government and death of MirzaKoochak Khan.

October Revolution and the Rise of Bolshevism in Russia

Waiting for a communist revolution in one of the countries of Western Europe, Marx and later Marxists argued that such a revolution shall happen in the most advanced stage of capitalism and in highly developed countries. That was while this was in Russia that, for the first time, a group came unexpectedly to power in the name of Marxism.

In capitalism, Marx anticipated, excessive exploitation would reach workers to a stage where they have nothing to lose but the chains ensnaring them. Leader of the October Revolution, Lenin, was on the belief that workers of western societies are, all due to imperialism, far from being revolutionary workers and their interests are linked with the bourgeoisie. According to Lenin, imperialism is a mechanism which transports wealth from non-capital states to capital ones and part of this looted wealth goes to western workers, making them non-revolutionary ones [10]. Lenin, also, suggested that workers of capital countries shall become so involved in gaining their daily supplies that they would have neither time nor motivation to make revolution. Therefore, this is necessary that a frontrunner party leads on their behalf the revolution.

According to Marx, the reason for collapse of the capitalism is the working class, which is assigned this responsibility. He supposed that proletariat should be equipped with the revolutionary notion to fulfill its historic vocation [11]. Marx deemed the class consciousness as a result of the class itself not anything beyond. He considered the factory environment as almost sufficient for informing the workers.

Lenin believed that workers shall not attain class consciousness per se. The elite are, therefore, in charge of informing them and injecting class consciousness into their souls to engender class consciousness as a mental prerequisite of revolution among the workers. Workers are, as Lenin says, deprived of political knowledge and perception of their long-term interests due to their undesirable living conditions. To consider the extremity, they are thinking of their short-run interests and reception of slight privileges from their employers. Instead of opposing the nature of capitalism, workers consider solely gaining some slender advantages to alleviate their living problems. These are the elite that should inject social-democratic awareness into the working class.

Lenin mixed Russian revolutionary and religious traditions, constructing something which Berdiaev named “Russian Communism” [12]. Lenin’s ideas were well-timed for the society, whose members warmly received the then-known Revolution’s Ideology notions.

Third International and Transformation of USSR into a True Representative of Marxism

Third social international consist of Marxists who regarded the Soviet Bolshevik revolution the true manifestation of Marxism and followed the Soviet Communist Party as the first winner communist party in the world. Thus, the Third International was a system composed of national communist parties that practically was under the influence of Bolshevik Party [13]. Appreciation and expectation to receive contributions from this communist party, which was now at the helm of the USSR, were chief reasons that attracted world communist parties to this type of cooperation.

October Revolution leaders declared that proletariats of the countries under the dominance of imperialism, whose many populations were the peasantry, can arrive at a socialist country without shifting from capitalism, with the help of Marx’s and Lenin’s teachings and adoption of them with particular conditions of their own countries and with the assistance of international proletariat and socialist states.

As a matter of fact, Lenin and Comintern were suggesting two different methods for communist parties of capital states and basically feudalist and backward countries. Since feudalism was eliminated by bourgeoisie in advanced countries, conflicts were among workers and capitalists; therefore, communist parties were not obliged to make cooperation with capital-oriented groups. As feudalism, on the one hand, and bourgeoisie, workers, and rustics, on the other, were the major fighters in backward countries, making collaborations among these groups were logical and necessary in one stage of conflicts. Accordingly, main tasks were different from one another in the West and East.

Bolsheviks, Iran’s Communist Party, and the Jungle Movement

Russian forces entered Iran when the Jungle Movement was encountering numerous difficulties that threatened its very existence, prominent person such as Kasmaei had left the Movement, and English and Russian pressures were on the rise. Entering Iran this time in the new countenance of USSR Government, Russian forces established Iran’s Communist Party and played a large-scale role in the Jungle Movement. In the other words, entrance of Iran’s Communist Party into the Jungle Movement and the influences thereof were
among the most important issues dealt with in studying the Jungle Movement. In fact, the formation of Iran’s Communist Party, this party’s relationships with the Jungle Movement, and the policies of USSR Government about Iran in 1917-21 time span left strong effects on the Jungle Movement.

The most significant effect of victory of the October Revolution on Iran was the foundation of Iran’s Communist Party with the involvement of Justice Party members in Bandar Anzali in 1919. Justice Party was established in early years of the First World War. At this time, a political party led by Asadollah Ghaffar Zadeh, Bahram Aghazadeh, and Ahmad Amirzadeh was formed in Baku and renamed as from 1917 to Equity Party. Equity Party was part of Hemmat Organization, which in turn was a component of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. In fact, there was a close organizational and political bond between Justice Party and Hemmat Organization. Moreover, some members of Justice Party and Hemmat Organization were members of the Russian Social Democratic Party, too [14]. Practically, Iran’s Communist Party was a part of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and, then, USSR’s Communist Party in organizational, political, and ideological aspects.

Before Iran’s Communist Party’s establishment and its role-playing in the Jungle Movement, Mirza Koochak Khan—who was pursuing partisan warlike against English and central government’s troops in Guilan forests—dispatched a representative to Baku to attract supports of Caucasus revolutionaries. This mission came to nothing; although, Lankaran Committee of the Russian Communist Party declared its supports from Mirza-led Jungle Movement in its anti-imperialism attempts against the English Government in 1919 and before establishment of Iran’s Communist Party. Mirza, then, went to Lankaran to get in contact with communist heads and agents of Lankaran Committee [9]. However, when Mirza arrived at Lankaran, he was forced to leave the city empty-handed due to evacuation of the city by Russian Red Army [15].

In May 1920, Raskolnikov-led Red Army Fleets, which were in search of the runaway, anti-revolution White Guard Fleet, entered Anzali and occupied there [16]. Entrance of USSR forces to Guilan marks the second period of the Jungle Movement.

Main intention of Mirza Koochak Khan from approaching the Russian Red Army was to utilize their power against the Englishmen. Therefore, Mirza went to meet the Red Army officials three days after their entrance into Anzali. Although initially Mirza was dreadfully hesitant about making collaboration with the Red Army, he was hopeful to make use of the new circumstances to fight with the British Army and central government’s troops in northern Iran.

In 1920, Mirza entered Anzali and met with the representatives of USSR and Equity Party. Having religious thoughts, Mirza did not find communism compatible with the religion and stresses that sect-based advertisements should be prevented for a while [8].

Leaders of the government and the Russian Communist Party had, right from the beginning, the intention to exploit the Jungle Movement as a pressure factor in dialoging with England, prevent the British army from making a military re-attack to Caucasus via northern Iran, and secure a way for making political compromise. In addition, Guilan Revolution was basically an unsuccessful attempt made by the Bolsheviks and first Iranian communists to direct the Movement toward a socialist revolution in order to sovietize whole Iran through violent means [17]. In this way, supports made by Bolsheviks and Iran’s Communist Party were all aimed at issuing the theory of Lenin’s revolution. In reality, Lenin’s argument had its roots in his unwanted accepting this fact that hopes of spontaneous evolution of a socialist revolution without participation of the Red Army are wholly unfulfilled. To achieve its communist purposes, USSR taught many communist groups in different countries, one of which was Iran’s Communist Party that was involved in the Jungle Movement by the USSR.

According to an agreement made between heads of the Jungle Movement, Iran’s Communist Party, and the USSR, a committee called Second Revolution Committee was established in Rashit, in which MirzaKoochak Khan was the Warfare Commissioner. In 1920, Red Revolution Community sent a telegram to embassies, announcing the dissolution of emperorship and formation of a soviet republic in Guilan [18]. However, this republic was short-lived. The main reason of Mirza’s failure was Iran’s Communist Party and its members’ commitment to the USSR’s Communist Party. They were inclined to take control of the Guilan Republic by supporting soviet soldiers.

Seventeen days after formation of Iran’s Communist Party and one month after establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic, Central Committee of Iran’s Communist Party announced that MirzaKoochak Khan has been ousted from his prior positions. Mirza, afterwards, left the city and sent letters to Lenin and Madivani, head of Guilan-based Red Army revolutionary Committee—all fruitless, albeit. In 1919 and after holding of the Eastern Nations Conference, however, Soltanzadeh and his extremist opinions were replaced by Heidarkhan. Iran’s Communist Party, also, selected Heidarkhan instead of Soltanzadeh, announcing that Heidarkhan’s ideas will strengthen the alliance of forward-looking national forces due to his attention to local bourgeoisies and penetration of the clergyman among the peasantry[6]. Second Central Committee led by HeidarkhanAmooOghli appealed a reconnection with the Jungle Movement and MirzaKoochak Khan, sending representatives to Mirzaa so as to win his attention. With the presence of Heidarkhan in new revolutionary government and his cooperation with the Jungle Movement, a new phase in this Movement was switched on.
Heidarkhan met Mirza and new Committee of Revolution was formed. This was while the Soviet soldiers, after a British-USSR agreement over issue of Iran, were returning to Russia as from early 1921. Since then, the Soviet Union did not have any raison d'être for supporting—even superficial and promotional—the Jungle Movement. On the contrary, it, based on an agreement with Britain and Iranian Central Government, made attempts to resolve the Jungle issue, which was an internal issue according to an Iran-Soviet agreement (1921). When Mirza rejected dialogue with the Soviet ambassador, British and Soviet-backed military forces of the Central Government attacked Guilan.

Noteworthy about Heidarkhan and his cooperation with the Jungle Movement was that he was a powerful, independent political leader, who refused to break up with the Movement in favor of the Soviet Union. As a result of the Britain-Soviet agreement, all Heidarkhan’s efforts missed the mark and he was assassinated in a vague manner. Heidarkhan was one of those characters who defended Jungle Movement even after the Soviet’s about-face in its approach thereto. That was while the Soviet Union was considering its interests in its competition with the Britain. Soviet leaders, actually, desired to restore the advantages they previously gained from the former Iranian Government.

Ultimately, Mirza and his only companion, i.e. German Hovac with the alias Hooshang, who were looking for new friends, suffered from frostbite due to extreme cold in their passing from Talesh Mountains. Still alive, Mirza was killed by one of the SalarShoja’s handymen [9]. KhalooGhorban, Mirza’s previous companion and friend, took Mirza’s head—this precious present—to Qazvin and then to Tehran. This was the end of a man who was the most prominent revolutionary in six years of Iranian history and who was the figure dominant over two Iranian auriferous provinces for the last five months.

Conclusion:

Mirza Koochak Khan was a seminary priest teemed both with religious thoughts and national orientations. After numerous difficulties ensuing from post-constitution domestic disintegrations and foreign interventions, Mirza made attempts to take home ideals of this movement. He was thus on the belief that restoration of the state’s independence is achieved solely through discarding of foreign forces, combating with tyranny and oppression, and eliminating cruelty and injustice by forming a military front. To achieve these goals, Mirza desired to possess all possible forces. When USSR forces entered Iran and Iran’s Communist Party was accordingly formed, Mirza taught that he can make use of Iran’s Communist Party in the Jungle Movement. This seems, although, that neither Mirza nor the Jungle Movement leaders were aware of the main purposes of Soviet presence in Iran and activities of the Iran’s Communist Party, which were seeking to institute the “Issuance of Revolution” theory. This unawareness finally made preparations for the Movement’s fiasco. The most important, though vague, issue about the Jungle Movement and Mirza Koochak Khan was their relationship with USSR-led International Socialist Movement. Mirza’s relation with USSR caused some to label him as a separatist—however, with prominent researchers’ denial. Katouzian describes Mirza in this way: “Mirza was a Shiite Muslim and an uncompromising patriot, a tireless fighter and an incorruptible leader; Mirza’s sole goal was liberation of the country from the domination of foreign powers and internal corruptions. The Forest Movement was neither a separatist movement nor a Communist one” [19].

REFERENCES