

AHMAD URABI AND
NAZEM AL-ISLAM KERMANI
Constitutional Justice in Egypt and Iran

On October 29, 1882, Colonel Ahmad Urabi sat in a jail cell in Cairo and composed a testimonial for the trial for his life. Six weeks before, he had been commander of the Egyptian army and leader of a revolutionary government. The revolutionaries had stood up to Britain's bombardment of Alexandria and declared their monarch, Tawfiq Pasha, unfit to rule. They elected a people's government in Cairo. In September, however, British troops easily defeated Urabi's peasant army. In his testimonial, Urabi defended himself against charges of treason:

My sole objective was the emancipation of my country and the prosperity its people would enjoy under a just, truly representative government. Such a government would give the people their proper rights without distinction between civilians and foreigners, so that all inhabitants of Egypt would be as one, regardless of differences of religions and beliefs, since all men belonged to the same common humanity.¹

Urabi's movement embraced liberal principles of popular sovereignty, representation, and equality under the law. Like peoples around the globe, Egyptian revolutionaries viewed liberalism as a universal model of justice, applicable in all cultures. There was as yet no single term in Arabic for "constitution," but Urabi's movement united a spectrum of political groups around the goal of obtaining a written document to limit the power of the monarch and set out the rights of citizens.

Between 1875 and 1920, constitutionalism inspired the largest political movements across the region. Turks, Iranians, Arabs, and others of varied political persuasions joined movements to demand elected representation, legislative control over state finances, and equality under the law. Thousands demonstrated in the streets in the belief that constitutional government would protect their national sovereignty. They also believed that sovereignty was the prerequisite to the rule of law and to equality of all citizens. And they believed that their monarchs were vulnerable to foreign manipulation; they needed the supervision of a legislature.

The popularization of constitutionalism followed initial top-down efforts by reforming bureaucrats, first in Tunisia in 1861 and then by Midhat Pasha in Istanbul in 1876. These reformers presciently recognized the need to rally subjects' loyalty to their regimes. Both were short-lived affairs, however, as other elite factions resisted the change.

Beginning with Egypt's revolution of 1881–1882, constitutionalism became a grassroots phenomenon: the Iranian mass revolution of 1906, a second Ottoman constitutional revolution in 1908, and a final wave of constitutionalism in Egypt and Syria in 1919–1920. The movements grew steadily larger, inspiring thousands to protest and dance in streets, and then to cast their first ballots in parliamentary elections. These popular movements tapped feelings of injustice felt by commoners who readily embraced the principles of equality and representation.

Popular constitutionalism was a reaction to foreign intervention and the social change it caused. Since the mid-nineteenth century, European governments had moved into the Mediterranean to build ports and railroads, market industrial goods, and ensure routes to other reaches of empire. European missionaries followed merchants, building schools to train middlemen and translators. By the 1860s European steamship and railroads transported crops from the hinterland to Europe and distributed European textiles and manufacturers throughout the Middle East. Egypt became a “Klondike on the Nile” when the American Civil War caused a cotton boom.² British textile firms sought Egyptian cotton as a replacement for supplies from the American South. Thousands of European profit-seekers settled in Alexandria and Cairo: Italians, Greeks, French, and British.

Foreign investment and settlement did not benefit everyone equally. Indeed, many constitutionalists believed only the aristocratic elite

benefited. Their feelings of injustice focused on how foreigners created plural systems of law. The Great Powers imposed treaties on weaker Middle Eastern states that granted Europeans and their clients different courts and lower tax rates than ordinary citizens. A rising middle class of Muslim bureaucrats, soldiers, journalists, and educators expressed anger at the double standards. They remarked that most clients of the Europeans were Christians and Jews; as in Lebanon, sectarian tensions flared. In Iran, meanwhile, Europeans snapped up monopoly rights to the country's mines, to build its telegraph system, and to wholesale crops—to the disadvantage of indigenous businessmen.

Popular constitutionalism was also a response to the growing power of the state over citizens. The Ottoman Tanzimat and Egypt's reforms increased the number of bureaucrats and centralized power at Istanbul and Cairo. The central government reached directly into the everyday lives of citizens as never before. Tax collection and the military draft became more efficient. New legal codes extended state control in business, public health, and education. In the name of modernization, the states embarked on massive reforms in cities and forced peasants to work on projects like the Suez Canal for little compensation.

After the 1839 Gulhane decree, states no longer pretended to protect their *raya* (flocks). The Ottomans transformed their protective “garden” into a competitive market, in the hope that enterprising subjects would enrich the tax base. Foreign companies paid Egyptian workers lower wages than Italian, Greek, and Maltese immigrants. And the Egyptian state at first permitted the use of forced labor to build the Suez Canal, until workers rebelled. It is also no coincidence that revolts multiplied in the 1870s, when prices of crops and commodities collapsed during a global recession.³

Constitutional movements arose to restore the Circle of Justice but ended by replacing it with a new model of justice. Leaders came from the new Muslim middle class; they recruited educated artisans and village headmen, squeezed by the global marketplace, as the backbone of their movements. They believed that only a parliament could force monarchs to protect the welfare of the poorest citizens. They also believed that justice must be founded on the equality of all citizens under one law. Such an idea would have shocked Mustafa Ali;

it had deeply disturbed Mustafa Reshid Pasha. But by the 1870s, even state reformers like Midhat Pasha recognized that equal rights were crucial to maintaining support for states beleaguered in the international arena.

Middle Eastern constitutionalism reflected global trends that produced constitutional revolutions in Russia, Mexico, China, and elsewhere. In all of these countries, the industrializing world economy had encouraged the growth of new, educated middle classes. They provided the know-how and financial means to build sustained political movements.⁴ And they combined ideas of representative government and the separation of powers—modeled on the French Revolution of 1789—with local political values. Middle Easterners infused constitutionalism with an Islamic spirit.⁵

Middle Eastern constitutional revolutions were distinctive, argues historian Juan Cole, because of the region's particular experience of informal imperialism. Opposition movements confronted a dual elite. On one side were a monarch and his court, who profited from close ties to foreign bankers, merchants, and rulers. On the other side was a rising indigenous elite, shut out of power and burdened by the profligate demands of the court. To ensure that tax revenues were spent for the people's benefit, this elite supported demands for an elected legislative assembly.⁶

The shift away from paternalistic government based on the Circle of Justice toward popular sovereignty took different paths. While this chapter cannot recapitulate the entire history of the constitutional wave, it will suggest the major trends through the comparison of two cases: 1881–1882 Egypt and 1906–1911 Iran. Both were popular, grassroots movements led by a new indigenous middle class that spread constitutional ideas in their newspapers, schools, and political clubs. Both revolutions began with specific economic complaints and then blossomed into a carnival of political invention. Both ended when foreign governments saw their interests threatened, and shifted support to the monarch.

Constitutionalism transformed political culture not in the quiet of a scholar's study, but in the messy process of mobilizing large numbers of people. Like the peasants in Mount Lebanon, Iranian and Egyptian leaders expressed their ideals in a mixed, contradictory,

and sometimes ambivalent language. At times they appealed to the universality of human rights; at other times they insisted on differences between Eastern and Western civilization. Eventually, they forged a vernacular language of rights and equality against that of social hierarchy and privilege. Constitutionalism fused with a new collective identity of the people as a nation, and of the nation as the seat of sovereignty.

The transformation is revealed in the memoirs of Egyptian colonel Ahmad Urabi and the Iranian activist Nazem al-Islam Kermani. Urabi was a military officer of peasant background, one of several leaders of what Cole calls multiple, simultaneous revolutions in Egypt. Nazem al-Islam was a provincial religious scholar who migrated to Tehran and joined ranks with opposition leaders. The memoirs of these two men offer a window on motives and strategies of revolutionaries. But they are, by their very nature, also subjective and incomplete: Urabi was writing in his own defense about a revolution that encompassed multiple movements and leaders; Nazem al-Islam was a minor player in just one faction in the Iranian revolution. However, they both directed their memoirs toward a reading public and so by necessity invoked a revolutionary language that they imagined was shared. Critically read, their memoirs reveal how a common language about felt injustice became a language of future justice.

Finally, their memoirs reflect the differences in the two revolutions. Egypt's revolution pitted indigenous Arabic-speakers against a Turco-Circassian aristocracy allied with foreign capital. Class differences ultimately split the constitutional movement. The revolution ended, before constitutional government could be fully established, with a British invasion that defended the interests of the landed elite. Iran's revolution lasted longer and its constitution shifted power dramatically from the shah to the National Consultative Assembly. That shift, however, plunged Iran into a civil war that opened new cleavages between landed and religious elites on the one hand and a radicalized class of merchants, middle-class reformers, and workers on the other. Iran's revolutionary coalition ultimately split on religious-secular lines, and a Russian invasion secured the interests of the Shah, religious conservatives, and their landowning allies.

AHMAD URABI AND THE EGYPTIAN
REVOLUTION OF 1881-82

Urabi's defense statement and memoir were written without notes and contain factual errors and much hindsight. We must read them, as we read Mustafa Ali's reports and Tanyus Shahin's letters, as texts that reconstruct reality to suit the author's purpose. Their subjectivity is useful, however, in suggesting how Urabi came to question the norms of his society. He describes, in particular, how he viewed social hierarchy as an injustice only after exposure to the egalitarian policies of an earlier ruler. His narrative shows how the officers' revolt was inspired by an alternate vision of social justice, based upon equality before the law.⁷

Urabi opened his October 1882 defense statement by condemning the racial discrimination suffered by Egyptians in the army. He named his nemesis in the second line: Uthman Rifki Pasha, a member of the Turco-Circassian elite that had monopolized the officer corps and the royal court since Mehmed Ali took power as governor in 1805. Rifki Pasha had court-martialed Urabi in an 1879 conflict between Turco-Circassians and Arabic-speaking Egyptians. And in 1881 he had arrested Urabi for protesting against troop cuts that fell exclusively on Arab-Egyptian soldiers. "And so all promotions, decorations and rewards went to those of the Circassian race," Urabi wrote. "That is why, up to that date, not a single man born and bred Egyptian had attained in the army the rank of Pasha, or General."⁸

After twenty-five years of exile, Urabi opened his memoir on a different note. He had been tried and condemned for leading the revolution. Many Egyptians had blamed him for the failure. The bruise of humiliation showed as he introduced himself as a man of honorable lineage. He was born in 1841 to respectable parents and educated at the prestigious Islamic college in Cairo, al-Azhar, he advised his readers. The public has been given a false representation of the revolution, he continued. His memoir would correct the record.

The elderly Urabi wrote with less anger and more historical perspective about why he was provoked to fight injustice. His political education began, he wrote, "when I heard a speech by Said Pasha at the Kasr al-Nil [Nile Palace]." Said Pasha ruled Egypt from 1854 to 1863. He was a liberal and tolerant ruler who had opened a new program

to enlist peasants into the officer corps. That was how Urabi had joined the army in 1854, at age fourteen. Now, years later at the Nile Palace, elite clerics and officials had gathered to hear Said Pasha: "O Brothers," he said, "see in the condition of the Egyptian people which has faced tyranny in history, the oppression of foreign countries. . . . I see myself as Egyptian and my duty is to nurture the sons of this people." Urabi portrayed Said Pasha as a benevolent ruler who guarded the welfare of his citizens. Said addressed citizens as "brothers" to emphasize common identity. While Turkish-speaking elites were unimpressed by the speech, Urabi remarked, Arabic speakers "left with faces filled with joy, at the first expression of the principle 'Egypt for the Egyptians.'"⁹

In Urabi's memory, Said Pasha's inclusive policy was a brief ray of justice soon clouded by the reigns of his successors, Ismail Pasha (1863-1879) and Tawfik Pasha (1879-1892). They marked their distance from common Egyptians by formally adopting the title of "Khedive," from a Persian word for prince. Turkish and French, not Arabic, remained the chief languages at the palace. It was this exclusion—felt as a reversal of justice—that caused the ache in Urabi's heart.

In the 1870s, Urabi was one of just four native Egyptian colonels in the army. Turkish and Circassian officers snubbed them and mistreated peasant conscripts.¹⁰ They referred to the Arabic-speaking colonels, he recalled, as "lowly peasant fruit pickers."¹¹ The colonels shared fellow Egyptians' frustration at exclusion from Ismail Pasha's court. Unlike Said, Khedive Ismail's gaze turned toward Europe. He had courted the French empress at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and he built an opera house to stage Verdi's *Aida* to advertise Egypt's embrace of European culture. These royal projects were funded by profits from the 1860s cotton boom. Little profit, however, trickled down to Egyptian-born peasants and workers. And then the boom went bust, as American cotton returned to international markets after 1865. Egypt sank into bankruptcy.¹²

Bankruptcy and war lit the spark of revolution. To repay the national debt, half of Egyptian tax revenues were now siphoned to European banks. And to ensure repayment, Europeans entered directly into Egyptian government. Then the Russo-Ottoman War broke out in 1877. Sultan Abdulhamid demanded that Egypt send troops (Egypt was still part of the Ottoman empire). But Ismail could not afford to raise the troops. After numerous tax hikes, Egyptian landlords resisted paying

even higher taxes. Peasants rebelled, urban riots broke out, and soldiers protested for back pay. This set the context for Urabi's run-ins with Rifki Pasha.

In 1879, local Egyptian elites took the opportunity to demand a larger share in government. Under Sharif Pasha and with Khedive Ismail's blessings, the Council of Deputies issued a National Program to secure fiscal sovereignty and to draft a constitution. Europeans feared that the Egyptians intended to default on their debt. European consuls wielded tremendous political influence—as they had in 1850s Lebanon. They pressured Sultan Abdulhamid to depose Ismail. Sharif Pasha was forced to shelve his draft constitution. This was to be a dress rehearsal for a full-fledged constitutional movement in 1881.¹³

Urabi had meanwhile become leader of the Young Officers society, perhaps modeled on the Young Ottomans. The society responded to Arab-Egyptian exclusion from the highest ranks of government by promoting an Egyptian national identity. Other nationalist movements appeared at this time around the world, also mounted by local elites who had been denied promotion to the highest ranks of imperial government.¹⁴ Nationalism dovetailed with new ideas about popular sovereignty and constitutional government.

The Egyptian colonels were provoked to political action by a new act of humiliation: Khedive Tawfik ordered them to perform unpaid hard labor, digging the Tawfikiyah Canal. "We colonels were now once more with our regiments, and as native Egyptians subject to much oppression," Urabi told a British sympathizer.¹⁵ When the colonels refused the discriminatory order, they crossed the line from victims of misfortune to soldiers for justice. This was the moment, in January 1881, when Rifki Pasha announced troop cuts aimed exclusively at native Egyptians.

The Young Officers took action by submitting a petition to the prime minister, Riyad Pasha. This was a risky move, they would discover, under a regime that recognized no loyal dissent. The petition demanded equality with Turco-Circassians in promotions, the "cessation of discrimination by race and the enactment of just laws that would ensure every man his rights." It also demanded a new war minister and reinstatement of Egyptian troops cut from army rolls. Finally, it demanded a nationalist war minister, who would run the military "in accord with the laws of justice-oriented nations."¹⁶

Riyad Pasha responded with an arrest order: he threw Urabi and the officers into prison. But unlike in 1879, Urabi was neither prosecuted nor demoted. Instead, other army officers came to support him, from the First Regiment and Sudan Regiment. They helped Urabi escape from prison.

On February 2, 1882, Urabi and his allies from the First and Sudan regiments surrounded Abdin Palace. In face of such force, Khedive Tawfik was forced to relent. He pardoned the officers and dismissed Rifki Pasha. Urabi's defense statement stressed that even though he had been the victim of an arbitrary and illegal arrest, he had acted legally and loyally toward the khedive. "I expressed the prayer that his reign would remain stable and secure, firmly based on the principles of justice and equality."¹⁷

Urabi's demand for equality, however, was a challenge to the regime. His views echoed those of prominent Egyptian intellectuals like Rifaa al-Tahtawi, an educator who had studied in France. In an 1875 textbook on citizenship, Tahtawi wrote that political equality is based on human beings' equality before God: "This equality cannot be suspended by human legislation."¹⁸

Muhammad Abduh, a leading religious reformer at al-Azhar, also shared Urabi's demand for the rule of law—and Urabi's belief in the justice of revolt. The Egyptian people must enact political change themselves, he argued, just as the French did when they established the Third Republic in 1870:

The shift of government in France, for example, from an absolute monarchy to a restricted monarchy, then to a free republic, did not occur by the will of those in authority alone. Rather, the strongest contributing factors were the conditions of the people, the increase in their level of thought, and their new awareness of the need to ascend to a state higher than their present one.¹⁹

Abduh and other Egyptians were moving toward an idea of popular sovereignty, without yet calling for the overthrow of Egypt's monarchy.

Noteworthy is the frequent reference to politics in France and elsewhere in Egyptian political debate. Egyptians embraced constitutionalism as a *universal* model of justice—not as a foreign model. They insisted that politics in Egypt should rest on the same principles as those

in Europe. They rejected Europeans' view that Islam was backward and despotic. Islam shared basic principles of justice with other great civilizations in Europe and Asia.

Universalist ideas were taught by Abduh's mentor, the international activist Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Born and educated in Iran, Afghani was living in India at the time of the 1857 Indian mutiny against the British. In the 1870s, he carried his mission to save Muslims from imperialism to Cairo, where he held forth in the city's cafes.²⁰ He called on Muslims to act on the principles of their religion, to cast off medieval superstition, and to unite against European domination. Most importantly, Muslims must depose tyrannical and weak rulers who opened the door to Europeans. Afghani inspired students to start political groups and publish political newspapers. Before Khedive Tawfik expelled him in 1879, Afghani gave a powerful sermon to a crowd of 4,000 gathered at Cairo's al-Husayn mosque, condemning British influence in Egypt.²¹

France's occupation of Tunisia in May 1881 shocked Egyptians. The "floodgates" of anti-regime politics opened that summer. Landowners, journalists, and intellectuals renewed their call for a constitution—now as a safeguard national sovereignty. They had no faith that Tawfik would defend Egypt from occupation. Urabi agreed. Tawfik was again maneuvering to transfer Urabi out of the capital, to Alexandria. The khedive was again blocking forces of change. Only with a constitution could the people force Tawfik to implement reforms needed to strengthen Egypt. That summer, Abduh, who had been working as a government censor, joined the constitutionalists. He met Urabi for the first time in August.²²

The showdown came the next month. On September 9, in a scene immortalized in popular art, Urabi arrived at Abdin Palace on horseback, with some 4,000 soldiers. Only eighteen carried guns, Urabi later explained. They did not plan a military coup, but rather acted in self-defense: government forces had tried to arrest them earlier that day. Urabi dismounted, sheathed his sword, and confronted Khedive Tawfik in the palace courtyard. He made three demands: 1) dismiss the tyrannical cabinet of Riyad Pasha; 2) convene the Chamber of Deputies, which had been suspended in 1879; and 3) increase the army to 18,000 troops, to ensure national defense and return jobs to native Egyptians.²³

Urabi's memoir recalled the encounter as a battle for sovereignty between monarch and people. "You have no right to make all of these demands. The sovereign rules this country for his sons," Tawfik replied, according to Urabi. "Who are you, but slaves?" Urabi said he responded that the army and the sultan would back him up. "We are God's creation and free. He did not create us as your property."²⁴

Tawfik relented, and the crowd raised a cheer. He dismissed Riyad Pasha immediately and named Urabi's old ally, Sharif Pasha, as prime minister, and he promised to expand the army. In exchange, Urabi promised that the army would respect the civilian government's authority.²⁵

Elections were held in November 1881, and the Chamber of Deputies convened in December. Deputies immediately called for "a just and lawful regime." Government must rest "on the basis of justice and freedom, so that everyone could enjoy security of life and property, freedom of thought and action and thus genuine happiness and prosperity."²⁶

Sharif Pasha resurrected his draft constitution and opened debate. His 1879 draft had cast the Chamber of Deputies as an advisory council, much like the assembly in the Ottoman 1876 constitution. Like the sultan, the khedive would retain power over the cabinet and Europeans would control finances. In February 1882, however, Arab-Egyptian deputies demanded a constitution with real parliamentary power. Specifically, the Chamber of Deputies should control the half of Egypt's budget that was not automatically siphoned off to pay foreign debts. Sharif Pasha and his Turco-Circassian allies warned that European consuls would never accept such a transfer of fiscal power. But the deputies convinced Tawfik to approve their draft. Sharif resigned.

The Chamber of Deputies ratified Egypt's first written constitution on February 7, 1882. It established a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. Most of its fifty-two articles outlined the Chamber of Deputies' rights and duties. They expanded its oversight of the budget, required its approval of treaties, and made ministers responsible to it.²⁷

Urabi accepted the post of war minister in the new cabinet. He immediately reformed the military along the egalitarian lines that Said Pasha had long before promised. "The affairs of the army were put in good order and the deserving were now promoted rather than reduced

in rank," he wrote.²⁸ He became famous in Egypt, known as "El Wahid" or "The Only One." Newspapers praised him as an Islamic hero who redeemed Egypt's honor and defended the people's rights. He toured the towns of the Nile Delta, where he gave speeches condemning Turkish privilege. In truth, he proclaimed, men come from one common stock, with equal rights.²⁹

Urabi was, however, but one among many revolutionary leaders. Tensions soon surfaced on the question of equality. Urabi advocated comprehensive social reforms to abolish forced labor, distribute water fairly to small landholders, and to offer peasants loans at fair rates. Landowning deputies, however, resisted turning a political revolution into a social revolution. They guarded their status as elites and maintained contacts with the palace.

And Khedive Tawfik's inner circle had by no means accepted the constitution as a fait accompli. In May 1882, a plot by Circassian officers to murder Urabi was uncovered. Tawfik Pasha interfered to lighten the sentences of guilty officers. When Urabi accused him of double standards, Tawfik dismissed him from his post as war minister.³⁰ Huge crowds gathered in protest, forcing Tawfik to reinstate Urabi.

Europeans, too, moved to undermine the constitutional regime. In late May, British and French consuls sent a joint note demanding dismissal of the government. They threatened to send warships to Egypt unless the Chamber of Deputies restored the political status quo; that is, rolled back constitutional reforms. They also demanded the exile of Urabi. The Chamber of Deputies refused. "Public opinion was united on their refusal to accept the note, and village mayors and notables began coming to Cairo asserting their rejection of it and those willing to accept it," Urabi recalled.³¹ In effect, the Chamber of Deputies claimed the power of a true parliament.³²

The Egyptian constitution was an ambitious attempt to assert true legislative power and popular control over state finances. It would fail not because Egyptian culture favored paternalistic monarchy, but because landed aristocrats allied themselves with the British to protect their profits.

On a false pretext of protecting Christians from Muslims, British warships appeared in Alexandria harbor in June 1882—almost exactly eighty-four years after Napoleon's fleet had arrived. The British press raised alarms that Urabi planned a Muslim massacre of

Christians—much as Ismail had falsely claimed in 1879 that Urabi intended to install a "Muslim theocracy." In fact, Urabi had no connection to the riots that broke out in Alexandria. Violence had started with a petty dispute between a Muslim and Christian. Mosques had actually opened their doors to rescue Christians and Jews.³³

On July 11 and 12 the British ships bombarded Alexandria. Khedive Tawfik refused to accompany the Egyptian army as it retreated toward Cairo. He stayed under British protection in Alexandria, where he claimed to establish his capital. For the next two months, a rival, revolutionary government ruled in Cairo. On July 29, a national assembly of 400 notables, including Muslims, Jews, and Coptic Christians, convened. Delegates gave speeches only in Arabic, not Turkish. With the support of clerics, they voted to depose Tawfik, on the grounds that his alliance with Europeans against his own people was a violation of Islamic law. The assembly formed a common-law government, based on popular sovereignty, and elected Urabi head of government.³⁴ "All this transpired without my attendance," Urabi wrote in his testimonial, "until they themselves entitled me 'Protector and Guardian of all Egypt.'" ³⁵

The revolutionary government established a remarkable degree of public order, according to Cole. Civilian officials resettled refugees, distributed supplies, and protected property. The assembly attracted Egypt's young and talented journalists, religious scholars, teachers, and bureaucrats. Muhammad Abduh acted as its secretary. Meanwhile, thousands volunteered for military service and donated horses and food to the cause. Women as well as men helped to manufacture armaments for the coming battle.³⁶

Debates continued about revolutionary goals. Abduh called for the rule of Islamic law and called for a new caliph who would be truly sovereign and who would lay an Islamic basis for modern life.³⁷ However, the national assembly also embraced Christians and Jews and demanded equality for all Egyptians, as brothers. Some delegates called for a social revolution. Guilds advocated the basic democratic values of the shop floor. Village headmen petitioned Urabi to redistribute land to the poor and to give them government jobs.

Peasants, too, mobilized in the summer of 1882, in actions that recalled Shahin's movement in Lebanon. They conducted "land invasions" of estates owned by the Turkish elites, attacked tax collectors,

and refused to pay for the debts owed to Europeans. Some joined Urabi's army. Petitions demanding justice and freedom circulated among villages. As a comet appeared in the sky, political rhetoric turned millenarian. (The year 1300 in the Islamic calendar was to begin in November.)³⁸

Urabi considered the British invasion immoral and called Muslims to defensive jihad. On July 2 he had written the British prime minister, William Gladstone: "Our Prophet in his Qur'an has commanded us not to seek war nor to begin it. He commanded us also, if war be waged against us, to resist."³⁹ War against the khedive and Britain was "lawful and legitimate," Urabi argued, because a representative council had ordered it. Justice, in Urabi's view, flowed from the people, not the monarch. "The Egyptian nation, for all its variety of religious affiliation, did indeed do its duty in defense of the homeland."⁴⁰

On September 13, however, the British launched a surprise attack on Urabi at Tell el-Kebir, about 65 miles northeast of Cairo. He was awoken from sleep by the first shots. "I said my prayer and galloped," he recalled. But his peasant soldiers fled the battlefield. "I could see the day was lost."⁴¹ Urabi took a train to Cairo in the vain hope of organizing a defense of the capital. But Cairenes were dispirited by news that Sultan Abdulhamid had condemned Urabi as a rebel.

The next evening, Urabi took a carriage to Abbasiya Square and surrendered to British officers.⁴² Charged with treason, he was transferred on October 5 to a prison cell with only a blanket and a rug as furnishings.

Khedive Tawfik aimed to execute Urabi for raising rebellion. Sympathizers from Britain and in Egypt helped him avoid death, however. At Urabi's December 3 trial, he pleaded guilty to rebellion and his death sentence was commuted to exile. Urabi and several other constitutionalist leaders departed Egypt for Ceylon later that month. Urabi returned to Egypt in 1901 and died in Cairo ten years later.

In Urabi's absence, Gladstone appointed a veteran colonial administrator, Sir Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) as consul-general in Egypt. Cromer viewed the revolution with contempt, as premature in a backward society. The policy of "Egypt for the Egyptians" was incapable of stable government, he wrote, because it would exclude "Europeans, with all their intelligence, wealth and governing power" and



Colonel Ahmad Urabi led the multifaceted 1882 Egyptian constitutional revolution. His government ruled in opposition to Khedive Tawfik for two months before British troops occupied the country. Urabi was convicted of treason and exiled to Ceylon. This image is taken from a commemorative stamp issued in 1981.

(Yay Images)

because it would replace the khedive with "some illiterate Egyptian, of the type of Arabi (Urabi)."⁴³

The British ruled Egypt as a virtual colony, with a weak monarch and advisory councils packed with loyal elites. Cromer personally controlled Egypt's foreign policy, armed forces, and finances. From exile in 1884, Afghani and Abduh mocked Britain's claim to bring good government to Egypt, pointing to the turmoil the British had caused in Ireland and India. "Two years ago the English entered Egypt," they wrote, in a magazine they founded in Paris. "Blessed with English justice and improved by British administration, she is now, too, a land of discord. . . . Thousands of citizens have been tried in court and thrown out of their jobs in government."⁴⁴

Abduh returned to become mufti of Egypt in the 1890s. Like other elites, he had by then lost his zeal for revolution. He preached that Egyptians needed much education and a deep spiritual revival before they could handle political independence.⁴⁵

However, the 1881–82 revolution had planted the seeds of mass politics in Egypt. Workers continued to organize. They joined elites in a mass revolt against British rule in 1919, under the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians!” But they won only partial independence.⁴⁶ Urabi was revived as a national hero in Egypt’s 1952 revolution, which finally toppled the monarchy, ousted the British, and established a republic.⁴⁷

THE IRANIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION OF 1906–II

In Iran, constitutionalists also rebelled against a monarch under the financial yoke of foreigners. The Qajar dynasty had ruled Iran since 1785, but with only limited power over the landed aristocracy in the provinces beyond Tehran. Unable to collect taxes as Egyptian and Ottoman monarchs did, Qajar shahs resorted to selling monopolies to foreign companies to cover their palace finances.

In the quarter century after the Ottomans and Egyptians adopted constitutions, many Iranians also embraced constitutionalism as an ideal. They too consciously adapted universal principles to local practices, especially the model of the Circle of Justice. Bureaucrats, clerics, intellectuals, and workers united in 1906–1907 to wrest power from the shah. Their National Consultative Assembly briefly replaced the monarchy as the seat of popular justice.⁴⁸ As in Egypt, however, royal power was restored when landed elites and religious leaders dropped out of the revolutionary coalition, under pressure from foreign governments.

To a degree unseen in Egypt, however, Iran’s revolution split into polarized secular and religious wings, pitting the language of rights and democracy against that of piety and loyalty. For the first three years of the revolution a majority of Iran’s top clerics endorsed the constitution.⁴⁹ Only later did dissident factions invoke Islam to oppose constitutionalism. Islam was not, in itself, an obstacle to democracy. In these explosive five years, ideas moved quickly and fluidly; clear dichotomies emerged only later.⁵⁰

Protests began in 1905, with the war victory of the small constitutional government of Meiji Japan over Tsarist Russia. Many Iranians argued that Japan was stronger because it had a constitution. The 1905 Russo-Japanese War also sparked revolution by aggravating economic stress. That year saw a bad harvest, and the price of wheat tripled. Revolutionary pamphlets and speeches accused the shah of neglecting his people’s plight. Stories circulated of families forced to sell their daughters to pay taxes or buy food.⁵¹ When the Tehran governor publicly beat sugar merchants for high sugar prices, rebels fanned the flames of protest.

Three groups that had previously protested the shah’s injustice now revived their alliance: bureaucrat-intellectuals; high-ranking clerics, called mujtahids; and wealthy merchants. These groups had united in 1891 when Naser al-Din Shah (1848–1896) sold rights to the nation’s entire tobacco crop to a British firm for his personal profit. They led a nationwide boycott of tobacco that forced the shah to cancel the concession.

The new shah, Mozaffar al-Din (1896–1907), had clearly not learned his father’s lessons. He continued to grant foreign concessions. And in 1905 he committed a classic political error: even as he eased police repression, he adopted unpopular economic policies.

Revolutionary leaders knew, in December 1905, that the shah’s tariff policy and the Russo-Japanese War—not the sugar merchants—made prices rise. Secret societies sprouted to renew protest. Some were founded by Marxists, especially in the northern city of Tabriz. Other groups were started by liberal intellectuals, merchants, and religious reformers in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Kerman, and other cities. They found common ground in an alternate model of justice, constitutionalism.⁵²

In Tehran, the public face of the constitutional movement at first belonged to two top clerics: Sayyid Mohammad Tabatabai, a liberal known for his honesty and principles; and Sayyid Abdullah Behbahani, more traditional but also a good organizer and speaker. In December 1905, they organized a march against the Tehran governor who ordered the beating of sugar merchants. A general strike brought the capital to a standstill. The movement made three major demands: dismissal of a corrupt Belgian financial advisor, enforcement of Islamic law, and a House of Justice.

The House of Justice (*majles-e-adalat*) was a vaguely defined demand. The term was used for an advisory council convened by shahs earlier in the nineteenth century. As will be seen, the House of Justice quickly took on new meaning, as an elected (not appointed) assembly that did not merely consult with the shah, but promulgated law.

In a much-quoted sermon, Tabatabai reassured the movement that House of Justice was ordained by Islam. And Islamic justice, he promised, meant equality under the law: "We want justice, we want a majles in which the shah and the beggar are equal before the law. We do not mean a constitution or a republic, we mean a majles, an Islamic *nashru'a* house of justice." Tabatabai stressed Islam because the shah's religious advisor condemned the protesters as heretics. In 1905 legal matters were considered by most to be Islamic matters—in contrast to the Ottoman empire, with its tradition of *kanun* or imperial law. That the source of law might be an elected council, not the scripture, was a controversial idea.

Tabatabai did not play into royal clerics' hands, however. He subtly tried to expand his audience's imagination about the kind of government permitted in Islam. He assured them that Islam shares basic principles with other civilizations and argued that Islamic civilization could be open to modern and universal ideals:

Nowadays the Infidels and foreign nations have established justice: we Muslims have departed from the path of justice. . . . You must study international laws, mathematics, and even foreign languages. . . . Were you informed about history, about the sciences of law, were you knowledgeable, then you would have understood the meaning of monarchy.

Tabatabai was not alone in his cultural openness: the highest religious scholars issued decrees (fatwas) in support of constitutional government. They did so in the confidence that Iranians would not distort or corrupt their own cultural identity. Tabatabai ended his sermon with a vow to fight for justice: "Should they kill me . . . my blood shall water the tree of justice."⁵³

The shah remained unmoved. Months passed and he did nothing to fulfill his promises of the previous December. In June 1906 his troops killed a protester, who was quickly hailed as a martyr for the revolution.⁵⁴ Behbahani and Tabatabai called a second general strike. Rather

than face the violence of royal troops, however, on July 15 they led thousands of their followers—some claim 100,000—to take sanctuary in the holy city of Qum. They now demanded not only the dismissal of the premier and elections for an assembly, but also a constitution.⁵⁵

The departure of the mujtahids from Tehran left the political arena open to others. Some 14,000 merchants, students, and artisans took sanctuary in the British embassy's grounds in support of the clerics' demands. One-third of Tehran's workers were said to camp there, erecting one tent for each guild. Merchants provided the food.

As historian Nader Sohrabi has argued, the crowd quickly gained the ear of the populace and the shah. The traditional concept of House of Justice transformed into a constitutional assembly. The term *majles* (assembly) took on the meaning of an elected, representative legislature, not simply a traditional advisory council. The new majles would guard the shah's justice (a nod to the old Circle of Justice model), implement Islamic law, and inaugurate government reforms. The constitutional movement couched this innovation (as Ottoman reformers had done) in the deeply rooted practices of consultation and election in Iranian politics and guilds.⁵⁶

Among those who camped in the 500 tents was Nazem al-Islam Kermani. He was a cofounder of the Secret Society, a revolutionary group linked to Tabatabai. Some historians call lower-ranking religious dissidents like Nazem al-Islam, and radicalized guild leaders, the heroes of the revolution. It was they who pushed the top mujtahids to protest and they who formulated the revolution's constitutional aims. They insisted on a real legislature with real power to appoint a cabinet, to adopt legislation, and to oversee the national budget.⁵⁷

The diary kept by Nazem al-Islam gives an insider's view of motives in the revolution. The camp set up at the British embassy in August 1906, he wrote, was a veritable school for constitutionalism. Each night, by the light of lanterns, revolutionary speakers gave lessons to artisans and shopkeepers. In his view, the campers regarded constitutionalism as consonant with Islamic principles, not as an opponent of Islam.⁵⁸ The memoir demonstrates how pious people played a critical role in the revolution and that many religious leaders were willing to accept a secular government.

Nazem al-Islam was born in 1864 in Kirman, a southern city known for carpet making and for openness to religious reform. He

raveled to Tehran at age twenty-seven to study philosophy and joined the Secret Society, a group of self-styled “freedom seekers.” He became friends with Sadiq Tabatabai, the son of Sayyid Mohammad Tabatabai. Sadiq invited him to work as director of his “modern” Islam school. The name “Nazem al-Islam” means “director of the Islam school].”

In his diary, Nazem al-Islam wrote that the Qajar state was hopelessly corrupt and despotic and that it was necessary to destroy it. The Secret Society believed that a constitution would impose rule of law and discipline corrupt officials.⁵⁹ It also argued that constitutional government would collect taxes fairly, build schools, and reorganize government bureaucracy as a meritocracy. In short, a constitution would bring progress. Like Tabatabai and Afghani, Nazem al-Islam believed that absolute monarchy caused social backwardness, making Iran fall behind Russia, India, and Japan.⁶⁰

The Secret Society practiced the egalitarian democracy that it reached: while members took a vow on the Quran to respect the *lama* and protect the group’s secrecy, its membership was open to all Iranians, regardless of religion. It chose no leader, but rather recognized the Twelfth Imam, whom Shiite Muslims believe to be the messiah, as its sole leader. The Secret Society promoted active citizenship in religious terms: it urged members to pressure religious leaders to look after the people’s welfare and to educate people to defend their fatherland. It also inspired members with religious stories about heroes who sacrificed for freedom.

Historian Mangol Bayat suggests that the Secret Society’s Islamic rhetoric was more strategic than heartfelt: “Fear of *takfir* [being branded heretics] compelled them to enforce the practice of *taqiyya* [disguise] and adopt Islamic rhetoric, constantly referring to the holy texts to prove the validity of their views.”⁶¹ That did not necessarily make Nazem al-Islam a hypocrite. He was quite disturbed, for example, when organizers talked about manipulating the crowds with false religious symbols.⁶²

Like Lebanese peasants in 1858, Iranian revolutionaries likely saw no contradiction in a constitutionalism that resonated with religious values and respected the authority of mujtahids. Constitutionalism, in their minds, was an extension of popular practices of justice in guilds and Sufi religious orders. Contrary to the claims of the shah’s clerics,

they did not apparently view constitutionalism as a foreign idea that would contaminate Islam.

The vernacular language used by the Secret Society had strategic value as well. It helped to unite the many different communities. Revolutionary committees expressed the belief that justice based on rights and representation was the truest message of the Quran and the Prophet. That solidarity of faith made the revolution possible.⁶³

By the time he pitched his tent in August 1906, Nazem al-Islam had prepared to challenge political authority. He believed that change must come from the people: “Justice and national sovereignty must come about through and for the sake of the poor and oppressed people.” “The foundation of a constitution, or a republic, or a house of justice, cannot be solid if brought about by the elite.”⁶⁴

In the fall of 1906, Mozaffar al-Din Shah finally permitted elections for a “national consultative assembly.”⁶⁵ A quarter of the deputies elected were guild members, 15 percent were merchants, and 20 percent were clerics, including Tabatabai and Behbahani. For two months, the deputies debated and agreed upon a new constitution, which they called the Fundamental Law. On December 30, 1906, the shah signed it. A few days later, he died.

Iran’s 1906 constitution, with 1907 amendments, established a more robust parliamentary regime than Egypt’s. Articles 26 and 35 established that the powers of government “derive from the nation” and that the “monarchy is a trust given by the nation.”⁶⁶ The shah could take no loans and sign no treaties without assembly approval. And ministers were responsible to the assembly, whose sessions were made public. The constitution also promised Iranians equality under the law, as well as freedoms of speech and assembly. The assembly immediately used its new powers to block a new Russian loan and to plan a national bank.⁶⁷

Some amendments to the constitution drew heated controversy. Conservative clerics—including Tehran’s top mujtahid, Shaykh Fazul-lah Nuri—battled against compulsory schooling, a free press, and equal rights for all males, including non-Muslims. In the end they accepted these in exchange for the establishment of a clerical council to vet all laws for compliance with Islam. Nuri would serve along with Behbahani, Tabatabai, and two others. In the end, the clerical council never actually convened.⁶⁸



Iranian citizens gather in a square in Tehran to celebrate the inauguration of a new parliament in 1910.

(*Ressimli Kitab*, June 1910)

Nazem al-Islam's diary entries from 1907 stress the importance of the assembly as representative of the entire Iranian nation and as guardian of its sovereignty. Now that the assembly's approval was required on contracts with foreigners, he noted, the shah could not violate national sovereignty at will.⁶⁹ The assembly also challenged the shah's role, in the old Circle of Justice, as guarantor of justice. It adopted "Adl-i Mozaffar" ("Justice Victorious") at its official emblem.

An early litmus test of the revolution was the much-publicized case of girls sold into slavery in 1905 because their family needed to pay high taxes to the governor of Khurasan, even in a time of drought. The girls' families petitioned the assembly to restore justice undone by the old regime. The public demanded equality of rich and poor under the law. "Until recently, it was impossible for a poor, weak man to confront an autocratic ruler or notable person," wrote a preacher about the governor's trial. "We lived and saw with our own eyes that [the governor of Khurasan is] equal with two poor Quchani peasant men and the Minister of Justice does not discriminate between them at all."⁷⁰

(Secretly, however, officials worked to divert blame from the governor onto lower officials.)

Meanwhile, revolutionary societies and committees mushroomed across Iran. Hundreds of them were deputized as the administrative arm of the revolution. Many of them ran on the same system of personal clienteles that operated in Tehran. They used sit-ins, petitions, and general strikes to pressure local officials to adhere to the rule of law, to collect taxes fairly, and to uphold the authority of the assembly.

However, conflict flared in December 1907 when Nuri broke his promise to Behbahani and Tabatabai that he would accept the assembly. He staged a demonstration with chants like "We want the Qur'an, not the Constitution!" Nuri joined forces with Mozaffar al-Din Shah's son and successor, Muhammad Ali Shah (1907–1909), who despised the constitution and assembly. But when the shah tried to stage a coup by storming the assembly, 4,000 constitutionalists barricaded the building.⁷¹ And the Society of Guilds staged a general strike that overwhelmed Nuri's demonstration. The shah aborted the coup when the top clerics of Shiism, based in the holy city of Najaf (Iraq), issued decrees supporting the constitution as a bulwark against tyranny.⁷²

The shah staged a second coup in June 1908, when he sent troops to occupy Tehran. He ordered the assembly building bombed when deputies refused to grant him the powers of the German emperor, including full control over the military. More than 200 people were killed. The siege launched a civil war.

For the next year, the center of the revolution moved to the northern city of Tabriz. It survived in the provinces through its grassroots networks and committees. With support of Bakhtiari tribal leaders and radical fighters from Tabriz, the revolutionaries retook Tehran and restored constitutional government in July 1909. A revolutionary tribunal deposed Muhammad Ali Shah and replaced him with his twelve-year-old son, Ahmad. The tribunal also charged Nuri with the murder of four constitutionalists and ordered him hanged in a square opposite the assembly building.⁷³

The execution of Nuri met wide approval, but it alarmed clerics, including Behbahani and Tabatabai. Sensing a threat to religious authority, Behbahani and Tabatabai broke with the civil war's heroes—the tribal and socialist radicals from Tabriz. Political views polarized

and split the revolutionary coalition. It was at this juncture that the idea that Islam opposed democracy gained political traction.

The new Democrat Party, under the leadership of a merchant named Hasan Taqizadeh, abolished the assembly's clerical council, demanding the separation of religion and state. Taqizadeh also called for complete equality of Muslims and non-Muslims. Magazines like *Adalet* (the name means "justice") advocated a social revolution that openly threatened elites: "O you partisans of justice and equality, strive to educate the workers and to build a more just world, so that the rights of all classes . . . are preserved."⁷⁴

Behbahani and Tabatabai joined the opposing Moderate Party, whose members included royalist landowners and tribal chiefs. They now adopted Nuri's methods: they attracted a wide following among artisans and merchants by accusing the Democrats of being atheists.⁷⁵ Behbahani even demanded Taqizadeh's expulsion from the assembly.

The shift in political balance is demonstrated by the changing views of Nazem al-Islam and the Secret Society. Nazem al-Islam had gone into hiding when Nuri took control of Tehran in July 1909. He was dismayed at the seeming defeat of the constitutional cause. He blamed the ignorance of the masses, blamed Behbahani for taking bribes and compromising principle, and blamed newspapers for intervening in Islamic affairs.

The Secret Society quietly dropped its earlier socialist and pluralist deals.⁷⁶ It increasingly looked to the early Muslims of the Prophet's era for a model of constitutionalism. And Nazem al-Islam cautioned members that the term constitutionalism (*mashrutiyyat*) was dangerous. They must emphasize its meaning as being similar to *mashru'iyat*, a word that refers to the application of Islamic law and justice.⁷⁷ And when conservative clerics criticized the Secret Society's modern schools, it reassured them: "A constitutional government is one which governs according to the principles of the Shari'a (Islamic law)."⁷⁸

Nazem al-Islam also sympathized with a fellow Secret Society member Arshad al-Dowleh, who switched allegiances to the shah because he feared chaos if Democrats overthrew the monarchy. The people no longer want the constitution, Nazem al-Islam wrote, "because of the corruption, chaos and war of factions." We need to educate the people first, he continued. "There is no point to having a constitution in a country

full of ignorant people."⁷⁹ His reasoning echoed that of Muhammad Abduh, who turned against the Urabi revolution in Egypt.

On July 15, 1910, Behbahani was found murdered in his home. The city was shocked, and the bazaars closed. Democratic leader Taqizadeh fled to Istanbul amidst suspicion that he was linked to the crime. Government troops shot thirty Democrats who protested in defense of Taqizadeh.

Demoralization set the stage for Russia's intervention, which would virtually end the revolution in December 1911. The assembly had hired an American advisor, Morgan Shuster, to reorganize state finances and administration. Shuster cut the palace budget, eliminated the salt tax on the poor, and increased revenues from wealthier citizens. By the fall of 1911, the Democrats used the new revenues to implement compulsory free education and build a secular judiciary. Their ambitions were trimmed, however, when Shuster's tax collectors stepped on Russian prerogatives in northern Iran. With support from the American and British ambassadors, the Russians issued an ultimatum to the assembly: fire Shuster or Russian troops will invade.

In a December 1 vote, the assembly unanimously rejected the Russian ultimatum. Some 50,000 people protested in Tehran streets, proclaiming Iranian sovereignty and rights. In response, the Russian army occupied Tabriz, Rasht, and Khurasan. Constitutionalists stood their ground. A group of women even stormed the assembly building to forbid deputies from backing down.

On December 11, the top clerics of Najaf and Karbala issued a decree calling for holy war (jihad) to defend Muslim sovereignty. Like Winston Churchill, they reasoned that democracy was the least bad form of government. The alternative was the shah's tyranny, which they compared to the despotism of the evil Caliph Yezid, who had slain the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn.⁸⁰

But on December 24, as the Russians stood hours from Tehran, the conservative cabinet violated the constitution to fire Shuster and suspend the assembly. In Tabriz, hundreds of constitutionalists were arrested and killed by Russian troops. Conservative clerics chanted, "We don't want the constitution, we want religion!"⁸¹ Shuster left Iran, and the constitutional revolution effectively ended. Revolutionary committees and newspapers were shut down around the country. Power

returned to the palace, which ruled in neglect and violation of the 1906 constitution until the fall of the Qajar dynasty in 1925.

In his 1912 book, *The Strangling of Persia*, Shuster condemned foreign subversion of Iranian democracy:

With a knowledge of the facts of Persia's downfall, the scales drop from the eyes of the most incredulous and it is clear that she was the helpless victim of the wretched game of cards which a few European powers, with the skill of centuries of practice, still play with weaker nations as the stake, and the lives, honor and progress of whole races as the forfeit.⁸²

Shuster correctly predicted the enduring consequences for relations between peoples of the Middle East and of Europe and the United States. Distrust sown in 1911 would be inscribed in the political programs of Iranian constitutionalists for decades to come. As in Egypt, they learned the lesson that the struggle for democracy was a transnational process, determined in part by the actions of distant rulers.

The written constitutions adopted in Istanbul in 1876, Cairo in 1882, and in Tehran in 1906 broke with the old Circle of Justice. Their language of rights and implicit assertion of popular sovereignty refuted the patrimonialism of the sultan, the khedive and the shah.⁸³ No longer would citizens' welfare depend on the beneficence of the monarch. They claimed justice as a right.

A new model of justice, Islamic constitutionalism, crystallized in Iran in 1906–1907, observes sociologist Said Arjomand. Islamic law acted as a limit on government, but not as the basis of it. "Although it was arrived at in a long process of popular constitutional struggle," Arjomand concluded, the 1906 Iranian constitution "can be considered the most logical outcome of the pledge in the Ottoman Rose Garden Charter of 1839 that the Tanzimat laws would be in accordance with the *sharia*."⁸⁴

Constitutionalists mobilized popular support around two principles: sovereignty and equality. They promised to strengthen government and to bring all citizens under one law. In 1907 Iran, civil equality was won for non-Muslims in a bargain that gave clerics oversight of

legislation. Egypt's revolutionary government at Cairo declared equality for Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and Turk, in the summer of 1882. And in the Ottoman empire, the 1876 parliament had included a disproportionate number of non-Muslim deputies.

Constitutional government would finally realize the promise of equality made in the 1839 Gulhane decree, Midhat Pasha argued, by fusing the diverse peoples of the empire into one Ottoman citizenry. "Out of this fusion should spring the progressive development of the populations, to whatever nationality and whatever religion they may belong," he wrote in an 1878 article. "It is the only remedy for our ills and the sole means we have of struggling with advantage against enemies at home and abroad."⁸⁵

Enemies at home and abroad, however, cut short the constitutional revolutions. Foreign powers took advantage of the revolutionary moment to invade, annex, and occupy territory in Iran, the Ottoman empire, and Egypt. In short, they punctured the hope that constitutions would strengthen sovereignty. The promise of rule of law was undermined when monarchs resumed power and persecuted constitutionalists. Nor was Gulhane's promise of equality realized. Sultan Abdulhamid reversed Midhat's multiculturalism and promoted the Ottoman empire as an Islamic power. In Egypt and Iran, too, internal enemies of constitutionalism fueled a backlash against non-Muslims. Not only were non-Muslims scolded to keep to their subordinate place, but they were also accused of being proxies of foreign powers and threats to Islam.

As sociologist Charles Kurzman observes, the Great Powers supported the global constitutional wave at the turn of the twentieth century only to the limits of their self-interest. As soon as their interests were placed at risk, they threw support to antidemocratic landowners, soldiers, and kings. Constitutional leaders in the Middle East reacted bitterly to Europe's false promise of universal justice.⁸⁶

The trauma of World War I brought the era of popular constitutionalism to an end. Hopes of knitting together a multicultural Ottoman society through representative government dissolved disastrously into sectarian, ethnic, and nationalist violence in Turkey and Palestine. Britain and France's rejection of Arab constitutional appeals after the war gave rise to a new model of Islamic government that opposed liberalism as a European model of justice.

The sense of injustice, or justice betrayed, has poisoned political relations between Europe and the Middle East ever since. After the Paris peace talks of 1919–1922 authorized British and French occupation of Ottoman Arab lands, constitutionalism lost its hegemonic power. For decades, constitutionalism disappeared as the rallying cry of political coalitions—precisely because it had failed utterly to protect sovereignty.

But while constitutionalism was no longer popularly seen as the means toward justice, it would remain a goal. Constitutional principles had sunk deep roots in Middle Eastern politics. Constitutionalists had forged a vernacular language of rights and representation understood by common citizens. For the remainder of the twentieth century, constitutional principles of elections and representative government, of freedom and equality, would remain at the heart of politics.

II

MOVEMENTS FOR LOCAL AND COLLECTIVE MODELS OF JUSTICE, 1920–1965
