

The Essence of Modernity

INTRODUCTION

The author of the work translated here is Mīrzā Yūsuf Khān Mustashār ad-Dowla Tabrīzī, one of the prominent liberal thinkers who contributed substantially to the development of a theory of constitutional government for Persia towards the end of the nineteenth century. Biographical information about Mustashār ad-Dowla can be gleaned from his own works and several other sources of the period. Although his contribution is universally acknowledged in his homeland, he is hardly known in the west. Apart from an article by Mehrdad Kia, a few other studies devote short sections to his role before the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) in Persia.¹

He was the son of Mīrzā Kāẓim Āqā Tājir Tabrīzī, a merchant from Azerbaijan, and was born in the city of Tabrīz.² In his home town he followed the traditional curriculum, learning Persian and Arabic literature and religious sciences, and some elements of Islamic Law. He started his political career as a secretary in the English consulate. It was during this time that Mustashār ad-Dowla became interested in politics and curious about European culture

¹ M. Kia, "Constitutionalism, Economic Modernization and Islam in the writings of Mirza Yusef Khan Mostashar od-Dowle" in *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, October 1994, pp. 751-777; Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Persia: a Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Persian Politics*, Leiden: Brill, 1977, pp. 30-7; H. Algar, *Mīrzā Malkum Khān: A Study in the History of Iranian Modernism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp. 139-40.

² For a biography of Mustashār ad-Dowla see Muḥammad Ṣādiq Fayz, *Mīrzā Yūsuf Khān Mustashār ad-Dowla Tabrīzī, Yak kalima wa yik nāma*, Tehran: Ṣabbāḥ, 1382/2003, pp. 13-23. Our introduction has benefited considerably from this introduction; also see Y. Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā*, vol. I, fifth edition 1357/1978, pp. 280-86; Mīrzā Mahdī Khān Mumtahin ad-Dowla Shaqqāqī & Mīrzā Hāshim Khān, *Rajāl-i wizārat-i Khārija dar ʿaṣr-i Nāṣirī wa Muẓaffarī*, ed. Ī. Afshār, Tehran: Asāṭir, 1365/1986, p. 95.

and technological progress. In 1270/1853 he resigned his position at the consulate, and chose to work in the office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. First-hand information about his political career can be found in his *One Word*, in which he describes how Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah appointed him to a position of consul in the town Hājjī Tarakhān for eight years. In 1278/1861 he returned to Persia and had an audience with Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah in Tehran. Seventeen months later he returned to Hājjī Tarakhān. After three months he set out to travel to several European countries, visiting Moscow, and later St. Petersburg, where he stayed for six months. Here, Mustashār ad-Dowla was appointed *Chargé d’Affairs*. In 1280/1863, he was promoted to Consul General in Tiflis, a position he held for four years. At the end of 1283/1866 he was promoted to *Chargé d’Affairs* in Paris, where he remained for three years. When he arrived in Paris he visited the ‘*Exposition of 1867*,’ which made a great impression on him. From Paris, he made four private visits to London.³

Mīrzā Malkum Khān (1249-1326/1833-1908) has been identified as the person, mentioned in *One Word*, with whom Mustashār ad-Dowla exchanged ideas about the progress of European countries and the decline of Persia, but this is far from certain. His influence is in any case clear from the terms used. Malkum Khān wrote his *Kitābcha-yi ghaybī yā daftar-i tanzīmāt* (Booklet inspired by the unseen, or the book of reforms) in 1275/1858-9. This book introduced many key terms such as *qānūn* (codified law), *islāhāt* (reforms), *majlis-i showrā* (consultative council), *millat* (in the sense of nation), *huqūq-i millat* (rights of the people) and *millī* (national). Mustashār ad-Dowla follows Malkum Khān in his use of these terms to advocate legal reforms, and also in the literary device of presenting his inspiration as a message conveyed from the unseen world. While Mustashār ad-Dowla concentrates on describing the legal system which should result

³ Nāẓim al-Islām Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i bīdārī-yi Īrānīyān*, Tehran, p. 177.

from the reform, Malkum Khān also advocates the summoning of a national constitutional assembly: a mechanism for getting the reform underway.⁴

According to the author of *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, the friend referred to in *One Word* is Malkum Khān, but H. Algar has pointed out that they were not in London at the same time: Malkum's appointment to England did not come until 1873; Mīrzā Yūsuf Khān's term in Paris ended in 1870—the same year in which *Yak Kalima* was written—and he was back in Tehran by August 1871, at the least.⁵ Nonetheless, Algar observes that “Malkum's more remote influence on the composition cannot be discounted” and it is quite possible that Mustashār ad-Dowla was inspired to write the treatise by views he exchanged through letters with Malkum Khān.⁶ Malkum Khān is

⁴ Another Persian reform writer of the period was Mīrzā ʿAbbās Nūrī (Abdul-Bahā) whose *Risāla-yi madaniyya* (1292/1875) and *Risāla-yi Siyāsiyya* (1311/1893) set out broader principles for social reform, including reform of the legal system and institution of a code of law, and rationalisation of the court system, but also extending to educational reform, democratic accountability, the separation of the religious and political orders, and the summoning of a constitutional assembly to achieve these ends. These ideas were interpretations and applications of the ideas found in his father's writings (Bahā' u-llāh, 1817-1892), the founder of the Baha'i Faith. An influence from Babi or Bahai sources on Mustashār ad-Dowla cannot be ruled out, given the large number of crypto-Babis and crypto-Bahais among educated and court sources of the time (see, eg J.R.I. Cole “The Provincial Politics of Heresy and Reform in Qajar Iran: Shaykh al-Rais in Shiraz, 1895-1902.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol. 22, nos. 1-2 (2002 [2003]), pp. 119-126).

⁵ H. Algar, *Mīrzā Malkum Khān*, pp. 139-40; see also M. Kia, *Constitutionalism*, p. 764. Other influences are likely: Shaykh Rifā'a Rafī' at-Tahtawī was sent to Paris in 1826 and wrote a travelogue which shows a familiarity with French thought on natural rights, including Montesquieu and Rousseau. He also translated the French Civil Code into Arabic with a commentary. Since the structure of the *Yak Kalima*, with its 19 points, does not correspond to the structure of the Civil Code, it is possible that he has relied on some such commentary.

⁶ H. Algar, *Mīrzā Malkum Khān*, p. 140.

the person responsible for coining new words to express modern European political and social concepts.⁷ One of these coinages was to use the word *qānūn* to mean codified law, which is accessible to the public and rationally administered, in contrast to the way in which the Sharīʿa and the common law were administered in Islamic countries.

Whoever the friend mentioned in *One Word* may have been, Mustashār ad-Dowla says that he asked him: “Why have other countries achieved such progress, while we have remained in such a state of lethargy and disorder?” The friend answers, “The foundation and origins of the European system of administration are one word, and every sort of progress and benefit one sees here result from this single word. (...) The people of your country are far from the essence of the topic. (...) A few of you attribute the administrative system and progress of Europe to derivative and transitory things. Some of you think that they are based on sciences and industries such as the telegraph, steam-powered boats and carriages, and military equipment. These are the results and not the prerequisites. You only form inadequate ideas based on superficial reasoning. You do not give any attention to the underlying mechanisms. When you wish to throw open the doors of progress and civilisation in Persia, you fail to identify the *one word* at the beginning of your task. Every time that one of the Muslim scholars writes on this topic, purely for the sake of service to his homeland, he describes the history and industry of Europe without referring to the foundations and origins of their administrative processes. This is why the efforts of the functionaries of Islamic governments are fruitless and the writings of authors on this topic are useless and without impact.”

In 1285/1868-9, Mustashār ad-Dowla was summoned to Tehran, where he continued his reformist activities. Being a friend

⁷ On Malkum Khān see P. Avery, *Modern Iran*, London: Ernst Benn Limited, 1967, p. 115ff.

of Ḥājī Mīrzā Ḥusayn Khān Sipahsālār, who at that time was the *sadr al-aʿẓam*, he received a cabinet post, but after a dispute, Sipahsālār exiled him to Khurāsān in the year 1290/1873-4. Their friendship reportedly came to an end when Sipahsālār asked him to break off his friendship with Mīrzā Maḥmūd Khān, known as Nāṣir al-Mulk. Sepahsālār and Nāṣir al-Mulk were not on good terms and often clashed. Mustashār ad-Dowla refused to break off his friendship, saying: “I am friend to both of you, and I do not desire to break off my friendship with Nāṣir al-Mulk without any reason!” In 1290/1873-4, while he was in Khurāsān, he wrote the book *Kitābcha-yi Banafsh* or *Risāla-yi Rāh-āhan* (A treatise on the railway), praising its benefits. To further his modernist ideas, he asked the clergy to issue a *fatwa* in favour of building a railway between Tehran and Khurāsān. Because of his involvement with social and political affairs in Khurāsān, it was not long before he was appointed Governor of this large province. In 1291/1874, he was summoned to the royal court in Tehran where his services to the country were recognised. He met Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shāh, who offered him a robe of honour, and appointed him to a senior post for the foreign ministry (*wizārat-i khārijī*), serving in Azerbaijan.

In 1299/1881-2, the Ministry of Justice fell into the hands of Mīrzā Yaḥyā Khān Mushīr ad-Dowla Qazwīnī, who had been educated abroad and advocated a modern European system of Justice for Persia. He recruited Mustashār ad-Dowla to his Ministry, appointed him as his deputy, and granted him the title of Mustashār ad-Dowla (‘Counsellor of the State’). Mustashār ad-Dowla accepted this office, emphasising that “the decrees issued and implemented by the Ministry must be based on the Quran and in accordance with the code of laws.” Unfortunately, he was not long in this office. He attributed his resignation to the prevalence of customs such as bribe-taking and the overturning of court verdicts. During the same period, articles were published in Persian newspapers such as *Akhtar*, in which Mustashār ad-Dowla’s enemies complained about him and the way he was running the Ministry. Hostile people

attributed criticisms of the Persian justice system, published in newspapers, to Mustashār ad-Dowla. They convinced Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah that Mustashār ad-Dowla was behind these criticisms. This was reason enough for Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah to order the chamberlain Maḥmūd Ḥasan Khān to seize him and birch him. He was then imprisoned for five months and fined heavily. He remained there until some friends interceded, and he was then placed under house-arrest. Later he was appointed to a senior post in Azerbaijan, but his enemies again complained about him. This time, they brought him and his book *One Word* before Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah. It is reported that Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shah ordered the guards to beat him with *One Word* on his head and face, so that he suffered swollen eyes.⁸ Afterwards, the Shah sent him in chains to Qazwīn where he remained imprisoned for some time. His house was confiscated and his stipends were stopped.

Finally he was released from prison through the intercession of Zill as-Sultan, the prince-governor of Isfahan, and returned to Tehran. An exceptional source describing his arrival in prison and his physical and mental condition there is the diaries of Ḥājj Sayyāh:⁹ *"They reported that Sa'd as-Saltana had ordered that a carpet should be placed in the room next to ours, and they prepared the shackles for a traveller who was coming from Tabriz. They made the preparations, and for that day they shackled all of us prisoners. That afternoon they said, 'He has arrived at the guesthouse and Sa'd as-Saltana, bearing the telegram from the Shah, went to him in person.' I understood that this was someone very important, and I said 'If you see him, tell me what he looks like! They said, 'It is an old and honoured gentleman who has been broken.' One of the soldiers said, 'I know his title, for a consideration I will tell.' I said, 'If he is a friend of mine, his arrival is not an occasion for gifts, but rather a new disaster visited*

⁸ Y. Āryanpūr, *Az Šabā tā Nīmā*, vol. I, p. 283.

⁹ As quoted in M.Ş. Fayḍ, *Mīrzā Yūsuf*, pp. 20-1.

upon me." He said, "He is Mīrzā Yūsuf Khān, Mustashār ad-Dowla." I was very much dismayed by this news, because this highly respected man is one of the humane, well-educated and praiseworthy men of Persia, and he wrote a book known as *One Word*, and he was a close friend of mine. They returned and said, "Sa'd as-Salṭana read the telegram to him in the guesthouse and he responded: 'I already knew.' Because of Yūsuf Khān's personality, charisma and dignity, Sa'd as-Salṭana was very ashamed and he said, 'One who obeys a command, bears no guilt.' Then he said, 'Entrust your own horses and furnishings to whomever you wish. The chamberlain is at your disposal: you should go with him.'" So he entrusted his horses and luggage to Mīrzā Maḥmūd Amīnī, who was a friend of his. They brought him with the chamberlain and some of his luggage. When he arrived, we were locked in our rooms. They placed guards and ordered that nobody should speak. Then, from the next room, one could hear the sounds of chains and shackles. When I realised that the honoured person who was chained and shackled in the next room was Mustashār ad-Dowla, my heart stopped beating, and I lost the power of speech. My heart burned to think of the condition of the honourable old man, who had been devoted, all his life, to dignity and high-mindedness and the service of his government and the people. I was astounded by the conditions and trends in Persia. When they brought in the lantern I said to the chief guard, Ismā'īl, "How could they bear to put chains on the neck and shackles on the feet of this old man of eighty years, who has devoted his life to the service of the government and the people, in this country and in foreign lands?" He said, "The Shah has ordered it, in a telegram."

Night fell. It was the first day of the month of Muḥarram. It was very distressing for me to see the condition of Mustashār ad-Dowla. Hope was denied to us on every side. When they confine and chain such a great man, of such a venerable age, and with all the weakness of his years, what hope can we have of being freed? The guard Ja'far Qulī came in. I was so upset that I had a fever. I said to the guard: "I would like you to shackle both of my feet, and put a

chain on my neck, only, do not put chains and shackles on Mustashār ad-Dowla. After all, the purpose of chains and shackles is to prevent the prisoners escaping, is it not? Is there any suspicion that that noble man would escape, in his condition?" He said: "You are feverish. If you were not in such a fever, I would do as you wish, so that you would know how delightful it is!" When the guard went, I heard the voice of Mustashār ad-Dowla, raised in complaint. Calling on the guard, who was kind, I said: "Go and see what is being done to this honoured prisoner." He said: "I am not able to go. It is forbidden. We may not go from room to room." I said: "Ask his guards." He asked, and they said: "Since Mustashār ad-Dowla has a hernia and was chained and shackled, his pain has worsened. He is in a bad way and his breathing is ragged. I said: "You should inform the guard Ja'far Qulī." They said: 'We are afraid he will be furious and give us a dressing-down.' I said: "You know, if anything should happen to him, it would go badly for Sa'd as-Saltāna and for you all. The Shah would hold you responsible. He ordered that he should be kept under observation, not that he should be killed!"

He paid some three hundred thousand *tumans* for his freedom. This was a sum he had inherited from his father. After his release he returned to Tehran, but in 1309/1891 he was again seized and exiled to Qazwīn.

Because Mustashār ad-Dowla had no income, Shaykh Muḥsin Khān granted him 1,000 tumans from the government. He died in the year 1313/1895. According to Nāẓim al-Islām Kirmānī, the author of *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, he wrote a will during his final illness, addressed to his friends, saying: "Whenever I may die, after my departure, drag me to my grave with ropes when nobody is looking, because I am going to that Great One, the creator of all beings, whose majesty and grandeur are unrivalled. May he have mercy on his humble servant and immerse my soul in seas of his mercy. If at that time it is not acceptable to transport my body in that way, my will is that my bier should be carried on the shoulders of common

porters and buried in the eastern courtyard of Qabr Āqā.”¹⁰ Nāẓim al-Islām Kirmānī reports that, in accordance with his Will, all his friends hired porters to carry his bier to the eastern courtyard of that graveyard, which is situated in Southern Tehran.

Even during his final illness, in 1306/1888 in Tabriz, he composed a critical letter for the crown prince Muẓaffar ad-Dīn Mīrẓā. Being feeble and unable to write, he was aided by Ḥasan ‘Alī Khān, the Amīr-i Niẓām. In this letter, he addresses the crown prince personally, asking him to apply the ideas he had formulated in his *One Word*. Since Mustashār ad-Dowla outlines his view on many issues not covered in *One Word* in this letter, we have cited it in its entirety at the end of this introduction.

Both Mustashār ad-Dowla’s *One Word* and this letter contain daring statements directed at the ruling king and cabinet. At a time when the king had absolute power over the whole country and every critical voice would be silenced by death, Mustashār ad-Dowla offers an alternative, which will give more freedom to individuals as well as securing the position of the king. In *One Word*, he underscores several times the equality between a king and a beggar before the code of laws: “The king and beggar, subjects and soldiers are bound to follow it and no one has the power to oppose the book of law.” In another place, he emphasises: “there is no place for interference and giving orders in public affairs on the basis of one’s own opinion and personal idiosyncrasies, but only in accordance with what is written in the code of law.” Again he states: “No king is entitled to decree a single blow of the bastinado for the least of men.” Surely in an absolutist monarchical system in which all rights are preserved for the king, the following statement was a direct insult and undermined the King’s position: “no individual person in the world, whether king or beggar, civilian or soldier, has the right to rule. That is, they are not rulers, but are delegated

¹⁰ Nāẓim al-Islām Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, p. 171.

responsibilities. If they are called ‘rulers,’ this is in a metaphorical sense, and not in reality.”

The chief aim of Mustashār ad-Dowla is not to criticise the person of the king, but he lists shortcomings of the government, describing the appalling situation of Persia compared to European nations. Towards the end of his letter to the Crown-Prince he warns the government that if the rule of law is not implemented, people will demand it violently. Mustashār also states that “others,” meaning foreign powers, will force constitutional government on countries such as Persia. The way he chooses to present his reform was to become familiar in Islamic political literature: every European idea that he introduces is supported with several verses from the Quran and traditions. In this way, he tries to convince both the ruling monarch and the traditional clergy, who had a strong influence in society, that the ideas of reform, the rule of law, and constitutional government do not conflict with the Islamic holy law (*sharīʿa*). On the contrary, they can all be found in the Quran and traditions.

Despite continual suffering, hardship and adversities, Mustashār ad-Dowla continued to patiently champion freedom, justice and liberty throughout his life, as a civil servant and author. In addition to *One Word* and his influential letter to Muẓaffar ad-Dīn Shah, he wrote several other books such as *The Joseph Mystery*, *The Education of Children*, *The Book of Reckoning* and other papers and essays that were published in Persian newspapers.¹¹

¹¹ The following treatises are also written by Mustashār ad-Dowla and published in Tehran at Bīnā Publisher: *ʿIlm-i ṭabaqāt al-arḍ*; *Ramz-i jadīd-i Yūsufi-yi Tabrīz*; *Risāla dar wujūb-i iṣlāh-i khatt-i islām*. We did not have access to these sources at the time this research was carried out.