



---

**The Elite and the Change in Political Culture of Iran of the Qajar Era,  
Noorollah Qeysari, Tehran:  
Center of Islamic Revolution Documents, 2009.**

---

**Seyed Abdolamir Nabavi\***  
Faculty Member of the Institute for Social and Cultural Studies

---

Received: 2 March 2019 ; Accepted: 20 June 2019

---

Political culture in Iran, the changes in it, factors causing these changes and their probable outcomes have been of interest to writers and researchers at the present time more than ever; as a result, the concept of political culture, which is a newly developed concept in the political studies and research in Iran, is regarded as of great importance in these studies. Similarly, the number of publications focusing on this concept has increased dramatically. Each of these publications tries to offer a new reading of the socio-political changes and their outcomes through analyzing a particular era or a specific aspect of the subject. In this approach the roots and the key factors influencing the attitude of people towards power and politics are studied; the attitude of the people determines their behavior towards power, politics and in different times and circumstances takes different forms, such as support, criticism, riot or indifference.

**Research note:**

The Elite and the Change in Political Culture of Iran of the Qajar Era is one of the new books that deal with the years 1891-1925 of the solar calendar, which is one of the most important periods of the history of Iran. In this period important events, such as the boycott of tobacco, the assassination of Naseraddin Shah, Constitution Revolution, the Lesser Dictatorship, the conquest of Tehran and the decline of Qajar dynasty took place, each of which represent subjective and objective

this article aims to find out why the Iranian political culture went through changes in this era? The hypothesis developed and tested as an answer to this question is that “the important reason for the change in the political culture of Iran is the role that the political elite – authors of political writings, political clergymen, journalists and politician – played through the development and promotion of new political ideas and novel models of political system, and examining and criticizing the

---

\*Corresponding Author’s Email: nabavisa@yahoo.com  
changes in the Iranian society. The author of

socio-political situation in the years 1891-1925”.

This hypothesis clearly indicates that the author emphasizes the role of the political elite, both official and unofficial figures, and examines the changes in political thought and the development of political ideas and concepts in this period, as well. Thus, the crucial factors in the political conduct and performance of the elite are highlighted; the result of the ideas and conduct of the elite manifests itself through changes in the physical environment, social environment and political concepts, which are classified as “changes in the psychological environment”. Also, some changes occurred in political thought, which include the development of new political concept, the introduction of alternative political system and the criticism of the status quo. It can be concluded that through changes in the psychological environment of the masses, which are the results of the political ideas and conduct of the political elite, changes occur in the political culture of the masses.

The discussions in *The Elite and the Change in the Political Culture of Iran of the Qajar Era* are organized into three chapters: the first chapter is titled “General: Methods, Concepts, Ideas” and includes the preliminary discussion and the theoretic framework; in this chapter the characteristics, assumptions and drawbacks of the comparative historical method are studied. The author chooses the combined comparative method as his research methodology. Here the combination means that the author studies the changes in the political of a 30-year period, both synchronically and diachronically; moreover, he develops a relationship among changes in some factors - such as the political elite discourse, the elite’s inner relationship model, institutional diversity and the functional necessities of the political regime - and changes

in the political culture of this period in a comparative way.

The second chapter of the book is titled “The Elite and the Changes in the Political Culture of Iran” and deals with subjects such as the methods of identifying political elite in Iran and the characteristics of political structure in Qajar era. According to the author of the book, the political structure of the Qajar era produced long-lasting effects such as feeling of public insecurity, which crept into the political culture. The main elements of the Iranian political culture in this era were as follows: the intermixture of religion and politics, the heavenliness of monarchy, justice, lack of trust between people and government, xenophobia, anticipation (Mahdaviat). The main political values in the political culture of this era were as follows: influence, prestige and social respectability, independence, justice, security, patriotism and fight against oppression. The boycott of tobacco, Constitution Revolution and the abolishment of Qajar monarchy and the establishment of Pahlavi monarchy are three important events highlighted in the book as clear signs of change in the Iranian political culture. These events acquainted society with politics and polarized the Iranian society; they were accompanied by political demands and they occurred with the help of modern ideas and concepts which were unprecedented in the Iranian culture.

In the third chapter, the historical date is analyzed on the basis of the analytical model of the research so that the role of the elite in this era is elucidated. Three discourses gradually develop in this era as a result of the struggle and competition between the political elite to seize power: modernism or constitutionalism discourse (Mirza Malkom Khan), conservatism discourse or the rule of Sharia (Sheik Fazlollah Nouri), the discourse of a gradual sweeping change (Talbof). By study-

ing the writings of the representatives of these discourses and highlighting the themes of these discourses the changes in the political culture of the masses were studied through the examination of letters, petitions and political pamphlets of this period. As the author has highlighted, these writings are replete with interpretations, criticisms and demands which were pointed out in the discussion of the three discourses above.

In the conclusion of the book it is indicated that the boycott of tobacco is the start of the changes in the political culture of Iran. In this event, like in the other events, the elite play a greater part, in changing the political culture, than other factors, even the international events; the changes in the political culture of the masses can be easily seen by examining the content and the structure of letters, petitions and political pamphlets of this period. The research model of the book can be employed in studying the changes in the political culture of other eras of the Iranian history.

### **Assessment of the book**

#### **This book has the following strong points and weaknesses:**

1. The author has examined the problem raised in this book meticulously and has highlighted its necessity quite appropriately. He has expressed his interest in the subject clearly and has attracted readers' attention to the importance of the subject of the research.
2. The first chapter of the book, which is devoted to the discussion of methodology, concepts and theories, is succinct and well discussed. The author has been able to examine different approaches and viewpoints, and develop a proper conceptual frame-

work for the discussions in the following two chapters.

3. In the last chapters of the book the historical data has been organized and examined appropriately; the content analysis of the political pamphlets and announcements has added to the quality of the discussions.
4. In the final pages of the book – 409-411- the writer has tried to discuss the result with regard to the situation in Iran. Although questions can be raised about these discussions, taking note of such a point should be admired, because most books and articles on Iran do not deal with this point.

However, there are some weaknesses which should be noted here:

1. The main question and the hypothesis are discussed on page 212 (chapter two); it would be of great help to discuss the main question and the hypothesis at the beginning of the book so that readers can go on with the book more easily.
2. Although the author tells us about a historical-comparative research, no appropriate comparison is made and only three discourses are compared in the book. Although the comparative method and its drawbacks are discussed in detail, the discussion about the influence of the elite on the political culture of the masses is too short, and the nature of this change is not illustrated properly. This might be because the author takes the principles of elitism as the theoretical bases of his discussion. In elitism, the masses are assumed to follow the elite, and what are of importance are

- the political culture and the conduct of the elite.
3. According to the main question and the hypothesis of the book, the years 1891-1925 are chosen to be studied in this research; an important event in this period which is ignored in this book is the conquest of Tehran in 1921. Moreover, the change of monarchy in 1925, which is referred to in the book several times, is not discussed properly. With regard to the elitist basis of this book these two events are of great importance. Also, an important question that is raised in the book but no answer is provided to it is , why were Mozaffaradin Shad, and his father, not affected by their frequent trips to Europe, and why did they resist the changes intended by the elite? The answer to this question plays a great part in this kind of research.
  4. The sources used for the discussion of discourse are not cited in the book; and in spite of the importance of discourse in theoretical discussion, it is not explained appropriately in. This lack of precision has caused the author state that the competition of the elite for political power, has led to the emergence of different discourses. This ambiguity and also the course of the discussion which enters the realm of political thought, indicates that the author could have replaced it with the term “attitude” or even “ideology”.
  5. On page 197 it is claimed that some elements of the millennial movements were present in the movement of constitutionalism. Although this claim is quite interesting, no data or source is provided to support it. Also, on pages 198-202 the somehow constant values of the political culture of the masses are discussed, but no data are provided to approve of them.
  6. In some cases, the related sources are not cited in the book. For instance, in case of the discussions of Bernham and Easton (pp.216-217). There is a mistake in the bibliography, and mistakenly, Qeysari is cited on page 421 instead of Katouzian.