

Armenian challenges for establishing independent educational system in Iran from Mashrotiat (Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1905-1911) to Islamic Revolution (1979)

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Abstract: Armenian people include one of the most important religious minorities of Iran and they have been regarded as one of the most professional and intellectual population of the country. Since there have been few articles or books regarding the educational system of Armenian-Iranian people up to now, this article reviews the challenges and efforts of Armenian society for establishing their own educational system in Iran from the Mashrotiat (Constitutional) event to 1978 (the Islamic revolution), mainly during the reign of Pahlavi . This research was conducted based on the documents and studies performed regarding Armenian educational policy in Iran. The results show that the principle of education and religious training was regarded as a main challenge for the Supermen Armenian council in different provinces of Iran since 1941 and Armenians tried to follow up their request in different methods by referring to the ministry of culture and prime minister of the country. Establishing Armenian schools in different provinces of country was involved with different problems influenced by the socio-cultural condition of the province itself and the central government policy.

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1- Background and introduction:

Armenians have a long ancient history whose interaction with and presence in Iran begins some 2500 years ago in the Achaemenid Era. Although they shared similar religious beliefs as their Persian neighbors for many centuries, but also much of their language's vocabulary has consequently been influenced by Persian (Dalby 1998, p.36. According to Berberian (2001), even following their conversion to Christianity, significant Armenian communities have existed in Iran especially during the Sassanian (4th Century CE) and Mongol (11th-13th Centuries CE) (Berberian 2001, pp.34-35). Bournoutian states that, prior to the third century A.D., Iran had more influence on Armenia's culture than any of its other neighbors. Inter-marriage among the Iranian and Armenian nobility was common. The two peoples shared many religious, political, and linguistic elements and traditions and, at one time, even shared the same dynasty. Sasanian policies and the Armenian conversion to Christianity in the fourth century, however, alienated the Armenians from Zoroastrian Iran and oriented them toward the West. The Arab conquests which ended the Iranian Empire and the conversion of Iran to Islam in the seventh century culturally separated the Armenians even further from their neighbor. In the eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks drove thousands of Armenians to Iranian Azerbaijan, where some were sold as slaves, while others worked as artisans and merchants. The Mongol conquest of Iran in the

thirteenth century enabled the Armenians, who were treated favorably by the victors, to play a major role in the international trade among the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean seas. Armenian merchants and artisans settled in the Iranian cities bordering historic Armenia. Sultanieh, Marand, Khoi, Salmas, Maku, Maraghe, Urmia, and especially Tabriz, the Mongol center in Iranian Azerbaijan, all had, according to Marco Polo, large Armenian populations (Bournoutian, 1945).

According to Magrosyan (2006), Armenian people were mainly located in north western part of Iran and east of Turkey. This society was under socioeconomic pressure of Ottoman empire in 16th century. Armenian people could achieve their own national identity during Safavid dynasty (1501- 1732), and concordantly 250000 – 300000 of those Armenians living in hard socioeconomic condition of Ottoman empire, moved to current Iranian Azerbaijan territory. In 1605 some of the rich Armenian immigrants could reside beside "Zayandeh rod" river in Isfahan city, capital of Safavid dynasty. They finally established their urban society by the name of "Jolfa new town" with their own municipality and Sheriff, schools and courts.

During Safavid era, the Armenians lived in seclusion and their relationship with the government was in the hands of the Christian hierarchy and a handful of wealthy lay people (Sanasarian 2000, p.38). This led to a golden era which was especially pronounced in the 1630s when the first Armenian

school was opened and as the New Julfians brought back many innovations from their travels, the first book printed in Iran was an Armenian book of Psalms in 1638 (Berberian 2001, p.37).

Supported by Shah Abbas, these Armenians constructed many churches.

Since these people were significantly expert in industrial and agricultural activities, they were encouraged by Shah Abbas to develop their skills in near by societies. On the other hand, Armenian merchants of Iran could make stronger relationship with European Christian businessmen improving the export of silk and Iranian rugs to Europe.

In this reason, Armenian society of Iran could intelligently use their own opportunity in Safavid dynasty and established their own elementary schools in churches located in big cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan Julfa and some other Armenian villages. The prominent cultural steps in Armenian educational system in Iran was started in 1869 by establishment of the "society of science funds" whose main goal was establishing primary schools for Armenian children.

One year later, in 1870, the first Armenian school called "Haygazian" was opened in Tehran although some foreign religious missionaries established some schools in Armenian districts providing free books, clothes and educational tools for children.

In 1871, the "Society of Armenian women of Tehran" had also opened a school for female students of Vanak village, north of Tehran.

General curriculum of Armenian schools in Iran included subjects such as Armenian language, Armenian Grammar, General and Armenian Geography, General and Armenian History, French and Persian language, Mathematics and sport. Before 1894 most courses were provided in handwriting formats but after that, by innovation of printing machines, such courses were presented as published books.

In addition to above courses, music and songs were also taught in Armenian schools and Nigol Galandarian, the famous Armenian composer was teaching music in Haygazian school for a long time.

Sport especially, the gymnastic courses were significantly considered in Armenian schools in 1892.

Examinations were held in January and some high level officials of educational system of the country were invited to visit such examination session. Recreational programs were actively planned in holidays as climbing, and general visits.

Iranian Constitution guaranteed the Armenians one political representative in the Iranian parliament (known as the Majles), in 1906. Later, during the Pahlavi Era, this was increased to two representatives on account of their numbers – one representative of Armenians in the north around (centred on Teheran)

and one for Armenians in the south (Isfahan) (Sanasarian 2000, p.40).

The establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty began a new era for the Armenians. The modernization efforts of Reza Shah (1924-1941) and Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979) gave the Armenians ample opportunities for advancement and Armenians gained important positions in the arts and sciences, economy and services sectors, mainly in Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan that became major centers for Armenians with their numbers up to some 250,000. Many Armenians played a part in the defense of the Iranian Constitution of 1906 but throughout the Pahlavi Era (1925-1979) they kept a low profile in Iranian politics and were mainly concerned with "the preservation of their community" (Berberian 2001, p.187).

Armenian churches, schools, cultural centers, sports clubs and associations flourished and Armenians had their own senator and member of parliament, 300 churches and 500 schools and libraries served the needs of the community.

Armenian presses published numerous books, journals, periodicals, and newspapers, the prominent one being the daily "Alik".

As mentioned above, establishment and management of Armenian schools in Iran was seriously considered as important strategy among Iranian Armenian religious and social officials, but through the history, since Armenians were regarded as minority in Iran, their educational systems were affected by socio economic and political events of the country accompanied by periodical rise and fall at different times and sites in the country. There have been many resources regarding the political, economic, cultural and social activities of Armenians in Iran. Most of them goes back from their entrance in Iran up to now. But there has been obviously no article regarding the sociological events about the establishment of an independent educational system in Armenian society of Iran. Today some 200,000 Armenians live in Iran, making them the largest recognized religious minority in the Islamic Republic (Sanasarian 2000, p.39). The community had experienced a decline in the 18th and 19th Centuries, particularly after the Russian annexation of the South Caucasus in 1828 which saw many Armenians from all over Iran emigrated to modern day Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Berberian 2001, p.17). This article reviews socio-cultural events related to Armenian societies of Iran from 1927 to 1978 trying to find out to how Armenian people of Iran insisted on their educational independence and their own Christian schools in the country and how they could achieve their goals in this respect?

2- Aims of the study:

Defining the main socio cultural events and challenges influencing the growth of Armenian educational system in Pahlavi dynasty in Iran is the main objective of this article.

3-Methodology:

This study was conducted based on the documents and studies performed regarding Armenian educational policy in Iran.

5- Armenian educational system in Pahlavi dynasty

By the twentieth century, Iran, like Egypt, was a major center of Armenian life in the Middle East. The proximity of the Armenians in Iranian Azerbaijan to Transcaucasia and western Armenia brought them under the influence of the political activities of Russian and Turkish Armenians. Armenakan, Hnchak and Dashnak cells opened in Tabriz and a number of Armenian revolutionaries sought refuge from the tsarist and Turkish police there. The massacres of 1895-1896 brought Armenian refugees to north-western Iran. The Revolution of 1905 in Russia had a major effect on northern Iran and in 1906 Iranian liberals and revolutionaries, joined by many Armenians, demanded a constitution in Iran. Although the shah signed the document, his successor dissolved the parliament and it was only in 1909 that the revolutionaries forced the crown to give up some of its prerogatives.

Iranian Armenians identified with the movement, with revolutionary Iranians, and with constitutional change.

During the first Pahlavi dynasty, Reza shah ordered to close all Armenian schools (1936), when he met Ataturk, the president of Turkey. He also forbade any theatrical performance in Armenian language. This decision was under the influence of Ataturk since Turkey was not agree with Armenian society from Ottoman Empire.

But after 5 years, the government of Iran reopened Armenian schools and gradually these schools were reestablished in Tehran, Isfahan (Julfa), Tabriz, Urumieh and Salmast (west of Iran), Abadan, Ahvas (south of Iran), Arak (central part of Iran) and villages in.

6- Armenian educational system Kurdistan province

Armenians of different provinces of Iran were in close relationship with the central government and this relationship was mainly governed by Armenian high level religious officials. Based on Document no 101, because of the lack of official and legal documents one of the primary Armenian schools was closed by the order of the provincial branch of the "Ministry of culture and art" in Kurdistan. According to this

document, Armenian children under four years age were forced to study Arabic language.

Following this event, some Armenian authorities requested for reopening of this school. In their letter they informed that Armenian people of Saghez city in Kurdistan, one of western provinces of Iran, established this school by purchasing desks, chairs and employing Persian and Arabic language teachers. They explained that Armenian officials were trying to prepare their children for more understanding of Persian language in future, and six Armenian high level authorities signed this letter. Based on Islamic culture the central administration of education of Iran was not agree with the Armenian schools to have holidays in Sunday instead of Friday and this was one of the main challenges of Armenian society with educational official of the country.

Finally after different long term negotiation between Armenian and educational authorities of the country this problem was resolved and Armenian schools were let have holiday on Sundays.

7-Armenian educational system in Azerbaijan province.

Armenian schools were significantly active in this north western province of Iran and central Armenian consul tried a lot to provide more facilitation for Armenian education. In 1941, the Archbishop of Azerbaijan province wrote a letter to the prime minister explaining about the limited teaching time of Armenian language in public schools. He requested to employ Armenian teachers with suitable salaries and also requested 2 extra hours to teach Armenian students who are educating in Persian schools.

This document shows that there wasn't any Armenian school in Azerbaijan province of Iran in 1940 and Armenian students were obliged to study in Persian schools. In another document, the ministry of education wrote to prime minister as follows:

"There is a high distribution of Armenian students in different schools of Azerbaijan and teaching Armenian religion (Christian) and language may gradually cause Armenian officials try to have their own schools in the country. This letter was delivered to the special administration of the "king office" and the king ordered the ministration board to investigate the problem."

This process shows the high socio-cultural position of Armenian authorities and their serious follow-up for improving their educational system in Pahlavi dynasty. Dr Siasi, the minister of culture of the country, finally ordered to the cultural administration of Azerbaijan to include some extra hours in public schools for teaching Armenian language and religion and resolve any worries in this regard. In another document, the Armenian council of Azerbaijan

province refers to the Act 7 of the Iran constitution in which, freedom of education of Christian religion and Armenian language was guaranteed and public schools ordered to follow this role as best as possible.

Finally, Azerbaijan Armenian society started to establish their own schools in the province and requested the ministry of culture to introduce a principal for this school to issue the license for him. It was also included in this letter "public schools of the province have not considered the act 7 of the constitution yet."

In this answer to this letter the prime minister writes to Mr Narsis Malek Tankiani:

"If all of you are intended to open a national school in Tabriz (capital of the province), we may introduce an Iranian nationality principal to issue the license of opening an Armenian school. But such school should follow all formal rules held in all Iranian public schools, and only in extra hours, Armenian religion and language may be taught in there".

7-1-Re delivering of captured goods and equipments of Armenian schools.

According to documents in Iran central library, Vahan Kostandian the Armenian Archbishop of Iran and India, personally asked Iranian king in 1945 to redeliver all Armenian church properties related to Armenian schools.

Such event shows a period of banning Armenian schools activities in Iran in 1940s, indicating a serious challenge for reopening these schools according to the act 7 of Iranian constitution.

The ministry of culture issued the following condition for redelivering the banned properties.

A-It should be confirmed, how these properties are used in educational field.

B-All expenditures of Armenian education should be paid by Armenian themselves.

C-Since some non Armenian students are studying in these schools, another schools should be provided for them

D-Finally all Armenian schools should follow all educational rules and disciplines issued by the ministry of education and all properties were delivered to them.

8- Conclusion:

1-The principle of education and religions training was regarded as a main challenge for the high Armenian council in different provinces of Iran since 1941 and Armenian tried to follow up their request in different methods by referring to the ministry of culture and prime minister of the country.

2- Establishing Armenian schools in different provinces of country was involved with different

problems influenced by the socio-cultural condition of the province itself and the central government policies.

Some policies were changed after changing the minister of culture or the prime minister. All of these events occurred in spite of the approval of the act 7 of Iranian constitution for allowing religions minorities to have their own education in their societies.

3- period of "Mashrotiat" was the only time in which the minority religions of Iran were free to have their own schools.

And after this period there was many misconductance of this act (Act 7).

4-Armenian societies could establish their own schools in all provinces of the country they were obliged to follow the general rule of the ministry of education and were free to teach their religion and language in extra hours.

5- Armenian society was mostly of high expertise and talent in industry and business and such unique properties differentiated them with other tribes and societies of the country. These people had been successful to achieve some high level educational and administration positions in the country.

6- Because of the Christian religion, Iranian Armenian societies could be able to make more improved relationship with European and other Christian countries of the world and both Pahlavi Shahs used this opportunity for making more relationship with other European developed countries.

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