Social Democracy and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution

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The Iranian Constitutional revolution of 1906-11 brought forth a new type of grassroots democracy not only among the middle class male urban dwellers, but also among craftsmen, workers, and peasants, as well as some women. With the help of Armenian and Azari radicals, three social democratic tendencies were formed in Iran during the years 1906-11.

1) The Organization of Iranian Social Democrats [Firqih-y Ijtima’iyyn Amiyyun] in Baku opened branches of that organization in Iran, mostly known as Anjoman-e Mujahidin, after August 1906. The Mujahidin’s support was critical both to the newly formed Majles, and to the provincial, departmental, and popular councils, especially the ones in the northern region.

2) After Muhammad Ali Shah’s coup against the Majles in June 1908, Tabriz became the new center of resistance. Tabriz Social Democrats, a group of mainly Armenian socialists including revolutionaries from the Caucasus, became officers of the resistance force that was led by Sattar Khan, a rank-and-file member of the Mujahidin. In the fall of 1908 the Tabriz Social Democrats organized a conference in which they debated the future direction of the movement in Iran and corresponded with European social democrats over this issue. Despite their limited membership, the Tabriz Social Democrats exerted - particularly through their minority faction - considerable influence over the course of events once the constitutional order was reestablished in 1909.

3) During the second Constitutional period of 1909 the Democrat party, a coalition of liberals and social democrats with a social democratic program, was organized under the leadership of Seyyed Hasan Taqizadah. The party’s representatives in the majles formed a vocal minority in the majles and eventually joined a coalition government in the summer of 1910. The imperatives of coalition with the conservative Bakhtiari tribal leaders prevented the Democrats from carrying out their reform program and in turn further demoralized the public. The coup of 24 December 1911 against Majles brought the revolutionary period to an end.