This rich dynastic study examines the political histories of Iran’s last two monarchical dynasties, the Qajars and the Pahlavis. Tracing the rise and fall of both dynasties, Mehran Kamrava addresses essential questions about how and why they rose to power; what domestic and international forces impacted them; how they ruled; and how they met their end. Exploring over 200 years of political history, Kamrava’s comprehensive yet concise account places developments within relevant frameworks in an accessible manner. With detailed examinations of Iran’s history, politics, and economics, he interrogates the complexities of dynastic rule in Iran and considers its enduring legacy. Developing innovative interpretations and utilizing original primary sources, this book illuminates the impact of the monarchy’s rule and ultimate collapse on Iranian history, as well as Iran’s subsequent politics and revolution.

Mehran Kamrava is Professor of Government at Georgetown University in Qatar. He also directs the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. He is the author and editor of numerous journal articles and books, including *Iran’s Intellectual Revolution* (2008), *Inside the Arab State* (2018), *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (2018), and *A Concise History of Revolution* (2020).
A Dynastic History of Iran

*From the Qajars to the Pahlavis*

Mehran Kamrava

*Georgetown University in Qatar*
Contents

List of Figures  
List of Tables  
Preface  
Acknowledgments  
1 Introduction  
2 Qajar Autocracy  
   The Qajar State  
   From Tribe to Dynasty  
   Decline and Collapse  
   The Qajars and the Politics of Underdevelopment  
3 The Constitutional Revolution  
   Islam and the Qajars  
   Background to the Revolution  
   The Revolution  
   The Battle for the Majles  
   The Aftermath  
4 The New Dynasty  
   The Rise of Reza Pahlavi  
   A Society in Ferment  
   The New Pahlavi State  
   Secularization and Development  
   The End  
5 Iran and Great Game Politics  
   The Qajars and Great Power Rivalry  
   Iran and the Great War  
   Reza Shah and the Great Powers  
   Reza Shah’s Abdication  
6 Dynasty Consolidated  
   A New Start  
   The Mosaddeq Interregnum  
   Absolute Monarchy Restored  
   The Beginning of the End
## vi Contents

7 Economic Development, Political Underdevelopment 125  
   Pahlavi Developmentalism 128  
   The Peasantry, Land Reform, and the White Revolution 135  
   Political Underdevelopment 145  
   Conclusion 152

8 The Gendarme of the Region 153  
   Oil Nationalization and the 1953 Coup 155  
   “Natural Allies” 159  
   Iran and the Region 164  
   The Carter Administration and the End of the Natural Alliance 166

9 The Monarchy’s End 169  
   The Religious Establishment 171  
   The Religious Opposition 174  
   From Social Movement to Revolution 180  
   The End of the Pahlavis 184

10 Conclusion 189

Bibliography 195  
Index 212
Figures

2.1 Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar  
2.2 Fathali Shah Qajar  
2.3 Mohammad Shah Qajar  
2.4 Naser al-Din Shah Qajar  
2.5 Muzzafar al-Din Shah Qajar  
2.6 Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar  
4.1 Ahmad Shah Qajar with King of Italy Victor Emmanuel III, Rome, Italy, 1920  
4.2 Reza Shah and Atatürk meeting in Ankara, 1934  
4.3 Reza Shah, 1938  
6.1 Mohammad Reza Shah meeting with tribal leaders, circa 1940s  
6.2 Mosaddeq speaking to a crowd in Tehran, 1951  
6.3 Demonstrators attacking AIOC offices in Tehran, 1951  
6.4 The shah being met by loyal generals at the airport upon returning to Tehran after the coup  
6.5 The shah and Farah Diba at their wedding ceremony in December 1959  
6.6 Coronation of Mohammad Reza Shah, October 26, 1967  
7.1 The Shah distributing land deeds as part of the land reform program  
7.2 The Shah speaking at the Senate following his return to Iran, 1953  
8.1 The shah and President Nixon, Washington, DC, July 1973  
9.1 Prime Minister Bakhtiar introduces his cabinet to the shah, January 6, 1979  
9.2 Anti-monarchy protests in Tehran, January 13, 1979
Tables

7.1 Iranian oil production, 1913–1976  
7.2 Percentage of oil revenues allocated to development plans  
8.1 US technical aid to Iran, 1951–1956 (millions of dollars)
Preface

This book examines the political histories of Iran’s last two monarchical dynasties, the Qajars and the Pahlavis. In its long dynastic history, several monarchs and the larger dynasties they represented assumed themselves to be the apogees of imperial rule. But following the decline and eventual collapse of Safavid rule in the 1720s, except for brief interludes such as the reigns of Nader Shah Afshar from 1737 to 1747 and Karim Khan Zand from 1751 to 1779, the country was wracked by centrifugal forces, warring tribes, and dynastic pretenders. It was around the time of the second Qajar monarch, Fath Ali Shah, who ascended to the throne in 1797, that dynastic rule similar to what was the norm during the Safavids once again appeared in Iran. The book traces the rise and fall of the Qajars and their successor dynasty, the Pahlavis. The following questions inform the research here. How and why did each of the dynasties rise to power? What domestic and international forces impacted them? What were the characteristics and consequences of that rule? How and why were the two dynasties effective in fulfilling their goals?

Even if the Pahlavi narrative that their dynasty represented 2,500 years of monarchical rule in Iran is to be rightly doubted, the monarchy’s collapse is of great consequence for the longue durée of Iranian history. What occurred in Iran in 1978–1979 was much more than a political revolution; it was a rupture of historic proportions, a critical juncture after which Iranian history would never again have an institution that for centuries had been its centerpiece: the monarchy. With the benefit of hindsight, the Qajars and the Pahlavis appear to have represented the last gasps of monarchy in Iran. My hope is for this book to at least partially capture the nuances and subtle complexities of how these dynasties rose, operated, and fell.

How much historical self-awareness the Qajars possessed that they represented a long and at times illustrious history of dynastic rule in Iran is hard to tell. For their part, the Pahlavis, especially the man whom Iranian historians have taken to calling Pahlavi II, namely Mohammad Reza Shah,
were obsessed with their place in history, constantly devising and refining schemes to remind whoever would listen that they were heirs to a long line of imperial rulers stretching back two and a half millennia. In 1971, in fact, only four years after a hastily arranged coronation ceremony, the monarch threw a massive party for leaders from around the world to celebrate 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. Western diplomats and pundits dismissed the event as an ostentatious bash by someone with more money than commonsense. But the mocking dismissal of indignant outsiders did not lessen the Iranian monarchy’s perception of its reign as the zenith of dynastic rule in the country. “We, as a dynasty, have arrived,” the celebrations were meant to signal, “and we have done it in style.”

The Pahlavis may have “arrived” by the time of the grand celebrations in 1971. But in less than eight years they were themselves relegated to the dustbin of history. That arrival, both of the Pahlavis and of the Qajars before them, and also the end of both, is what this book examines. The focus here is primarily on the socioeconomic and political causes and effects of the most consequential highlights of Iranian history since the mid-1780s to the late 1970s. As much as possible, when space has allowed, I have brought in elements of social history – efforts at culture-making, the force of religion, the paradox of modernity, intellectual currents and torrents, the texture of life so rich and so often filled with highs and lows of ecstasy and sorrow.

***

1 The American diplomat George Ball’s damning indictment of the 1967 coronation ceremony and the imperial celebrations of 1971 seemed to have been widely shared among his peers:

What an absurd, bathetic spectacle! The son of a colonel in a Persian Cossack regiment play-acting as the emperor of a country with an average per capita income of $250 a year, proclaiming his achievements in modernizing his nation while accoutered in the raiment and symbols of ancient despotism. No wonder we talked among ourselves about the fragility of an anachronistic structure that compounded the doubtful expectancy of an absolute monarch with wasteful display. It was, I thought, a deliberate insult to the wretchedly poor with whom the country abounded. Still, though the prodigality of Versailles had nothing on the Golestan Palace, the greatest affront was not to come until four years later. Then the Shah and his queen spent $120 million on an opulent pageant at Persepolis that enriched not Omar the Tentmaker, but Pierre the Tentmaker and the other luxury merchants of Paris who handled the arrangements. A few minor heads of state showed up to keep company with Spiro Agnew, but the world was either too polite or too humorless to laugh.

Preface

In 1992, as a young assistant professor chasing tenure, I hurriedly published a book called *The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy*. Written much too quickly, no sooner had the book been published than I realized it lacked depth, did not do justice to its subject, and in many places failed to properly capture the context of what it was trying to convey. After three decades, the present volume is in part inspired by my attempt to present a corrective to the earlier book. Brief passages from that work have found their way here. Nevertheless, my hope is that some of the earlier shortcomings have been addressed in the process.
Acknowledgments

All books are collective efforts, and this one is no exception. I simply could not have produced this book had it not been for the assistance and care of many friends and colleagues, too numerous to individually thank. At home, I was blessed with a caring environment that allowed me to spend long weeks doing fieldwork in Iran and long hours behind the laptop in my study. I am thankful to my wife, Melisa, and my daughters, Dilara and Kendra, for making this possible. I was also fortunate to have received detailed feedback and suggestions on earlier drafts of chapters from a number of colleagues. Zahra Babar, Islam Hassan, Suzi Mirgani, and Mahmood Monshipouri all read and made enormously helpful suggestions on various chapters of the book. I am most grateful for their generous spirits, their friendship, and their insightful comments. Massaab Al-Aloosy kindly shared several valuable sources. I also had the good fortune of working on this book while benefiting from supportive environments at two institutions. In addition to enabling me to pursue my intellectual interests, Georgetown University in Qatar provided me with research grants that made it possible to do fieldwork and to collect sources in Iran. The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies also provided opportunity and a perfect intellectual environment for me to write the book. Colleagues Mohammad Almasri, Azmi Bishara, Hamideh Dorzadeh, Marwan Kabalan, and Haider Saeed deserve special thanks for helping facilitate my work and research at the Arab Center. I alone, of course, am responsible for whatever shortcomings remain in the book.