

Mujahedin Constitutionals

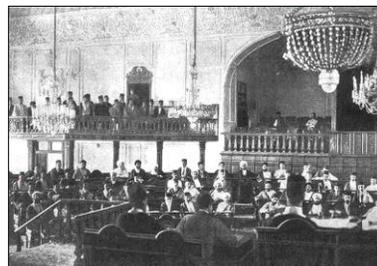
The People's Mujahedin of Iran was named after the mujahedin, militias "committed to a political philosophy and the fight for democratic government during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to 1911," according to author Steven R. Ward.¹

The mujahedin of the past and present have nothing to do with Marxism and to associate one with the other neglects an understanding of Iran's Constitutional Revolution and subsequent civil war.

On August 5, 1906, Mozaffar ad-Din Shah, the head of Iran's monarchy, signed a proclamation to establish a Constituent Assembly. He was pressured to make the concession following public demonstrations coupled with severe economic hardships and attacks on the government.

Months later a nationwide election was held to fill 156 seats in the new parliament (Majles). In October the Assembly convened and granted itself authority to draft a constitution.

Iran's first constitution (modeled on Belgium's constitution) was signed into law by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah on December 31, 1906. Five days later he died.



Iran's Majles in 1906

The constitution established a constitutional monarchy, with three traditional branches of government – executive, legislative, and judiciary. The constitution also included a bill of rights, which among its provisions established freedom of speech and assembly, habeas corpus, and other protections against arbitrary arrest.

Mozaffar ad-Din Shah's son, Muhammad Ali Shah, ascended to the throne in January 1907. Under the new constitution, his authority was restricted to managing the executive branch and commanding the armed forces.

Muhammad Ali disapproved of the constitution and set out to reverse its course. His first attempt to overthrow the constitutional government met with failure. He arrested the prime minister, dismissed the cabinet, and shut down the parliament. In response, "As many as two thousand mujahedin assembled to defend the Majles," Ward wrote.² The show of force, combined with foreign pressure, convinced Muhammad Ali to back down and he agreed to restore the democratic government.

¹ "Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces," by Steven R. Ward, Georgetown University Press, 2009.

² Ibid.

The victory was short-lived. With support from Russia, Muhammad Ali again attacked the government in June 1908. Royalist troops with artillery pieces surrounded the Majles. Muhammad Ali declared martial law, constitutionalist leaders were arrested, and communications to provinces and the outside world were severed. Again, the mujahedin rallied to support the Majles. This time they were outmanned and outgunned. After hours of fighting and more than 250 casualties, the mujahedin were forced to withdraw.

While the coup proved successful, it triggered a civil war. Royalist troops were dispatched to regions where pro-democracy forces fought to restore the constitutionalist government. Only the mujahedin in Tabriz, then Iran's second largest city in northwest Iran, was able to defend against the royalist forces. Under the leadership of Sattar Khan, the constitutionalists regrouped, fending off repeated attacks.

Inspired by the mujahedin, constitutionalists in other regions of Iran joined the battle. Royalist forces suffered numerous defeats and the mujahedin went on the offensive. They linked up with other nationalist forces and marched toward Tehran. In July 1909, they reached the outskirts of the capital city. They made their way into the city and after several days of fighting the royalists surrendered. Muhammad Ali abdicated his throne and fled to Russia. He was replaced by Sultan Ahmed Shah, who was only 12 years old. Too young to rule, a regent was appointed to manage the affairs of a restored constitutional government.

The PMOI, from its inception, has had as its goal the restoration of democracy and freedom in Iran. They share the aspirations of the original mujahedin, who supported a constitutional democracy. The PMOI's founders were members of the Liberation Movement, which advocated the "democratic principles enshrined in the fundamental laws of the 1905-09 Constitution."

To describe the PMOI as Marxist is absurd and clearly inaccurate. There is abundant evidence the term was used as propaganda to undercut the PMOI's public standing. The PMOI's true nature – an organization dedicated to restoring democracy and freedom in Iran – is reflected by its link to the mujahedin constitutionalists in Iran's past and its founders' membership in the Liberation Movement.