The Role of Kinship in Weakness, Deterioration and Collapse of the Safavid Dynasty

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Abstract: Like the macro socio-economic texture of the society, the kinship system in the court of King Sultan Hussein was composed of kin and relatives. In this regard, this article aims at exploring the mechanism of kinship relations in courts and their different roles in weakening the Safavid state. The current study applies historical research methods and library data-gathering methods to collect first-hand historical data, describe and classify the kinship features in the court of King Sultan Hussein, and analyze these features and their effects in weakness and deterioration of the Safavid state. Among the factors which might be applied for exploring the research question are the following: the kinship texture of court positions, supporting kinship groups, different competitions and intrigues for obtaining personal and kinship profits, and texture of court positions, which in turn led to court crises and distracted the courtiers’ attention from national crises and problems. The above-mentioned factors, in turn, paved the way for weakness and collapse of the Safavid state.

Key words: the king Sultan Hussein’s court, kinship system, court positions, collapse of the Safavid state

I. Introduction

Under the reign of the king Sultan Hussein, the kinship system overarched all aspects of the political, social, economic and military life of the Iranian society. Different kinship strategies were clearly observed in the related institutions such as families, tribes, neighborhoods, guilds, or in the higher social cast in the Safavid court which was the most effective institution in the Iranian society in the Safavid era. In this regard, the main question of the present study is to what extent and in what ways the court kinship system led to weakness and deterioration of the Safavid state?

Several works, such as “Falling of Safavid Dynasty” by Lakhart, have divergently explored the scope of kinship power in courts (e.g. Lezgi family, Fathali Khan Etemadoddole and his nephew Lutfali Khan Sepahsalar; or Gorji princes Gorgin Khan Sepahsalar, his brother Leon the Diwanbeigi of Isfahan, and his sons Keikhosoro and Rustam Khan Qullar Aghasi). Lakhart considers the kinship power scope as the main cause of opposition and competition among courtiers. For example, when Rustam Khan Qularar Aghasi, the step nephew of Vekhtanag the governor of Gorgia, married one of his daughters, Mullabashi and Hakimibashi prevented Vekhtang’s attack on the Gorgi Lezgis to countervail his power. In another case, Viziers were worried if Lutfali Khan defeated Afghans, he and his paternal uncle could increase their power. So, courtiers decided to destroy both figures, being ignorant of the fact that their action would put the whole country in danger. Some other studies such as “System of Local Authorities during the Safavid Period” by Reher Bern have focused on kinship positions in the Safavid court. In this regard, Bern has referred to some political positions of Gorgin Khan such as Biglarbeigi of Qandehar, nominal sovereign on Cartyl, and the commandment of his nephew Khosro Khan in the attack to Qandehar. Yet, no independent study has investigated the role of kinship in weakness, deterioration and collapse of the Safavid Dynasty.

So, to explore the mentioned subject, the authors propose this hypothesis: the kinship system in the court of the Safavid King Sultan Hussein paved the way for appointing relatives to court positions, kinship favoritisms and hostilities, and entrance of courtiers in positions they were not familiar with. As a result, the courtiers’ ignorance of the widespread political, social, economic and military crises in the country led to weakness and collapse of the Safavid dynasty. The current study applies historical research methods and library data-gathering methods to collect first-hand historical data, describe and classify the kinship features in the court of King Sultan Hussein, and analyze these features and their effects in weakness and deterioration of the Safavid state.

II. Kinship System Strategy in Courts

Kinship system was dominant in all social institutions. Kinship system in the social hierarchy is a chain which starts with families and leads to larger institutions such as “tribes” in migrant societies, or neighborhood and “guild” in urban societies. The most developed form of kinship system was that of the king and his court. The
court of the King Sultan Hussein was composed of a number of large powerful families working according to their family status. So, we start our study with analyzing the initial form of kinship system, say family. The first and the most basic form of kinship system of the court was the substitution of the decedent father by his great son who was inherited by his wealth and power. This was the commonest method of power transition. This method was an accepted tradition in the wide socioeconomic life of Iranians which included a spectrum of jobs and social positions such as businessmen, farmers, clergymen and kings of Safavid. In the coordinate socioeconomic structure of the society, fathers trained their sons to occupy their positions in the future. Several cases of the transfer of jobs to sons have been reported in the references of the era. In this regard, the King Sultan Hussein appointed Mirza Abolhassan Mostofi to the position “Agent for Retrieval of Lands and Mediator” (Nasiri, 1994: 57). As Muhammad Ibrahim mentioned, Mirza Abolhassan used to be the agent of court before being appointed to the position “The Agent of Lands”.

One of the other common kinship strategies in the court was the transfer of court positions to relatives during the life of the original holder. In this regard, fathers recommended their sons to other courtiers for obtaining positions. For example, the son of Rustam Khan Sepahsalar enjoyed the recommendation of his father and Aslamas Khan Qollar Aghasi to be appointed as the “Intimate Guard of the King” (Nasiri, 1994: 58).

In the absence of a systematic legal order in the Safavid era, courtiers used their family relations to overcome their competitors and promote their professional and social status. Court families formed a wide network of kin and relatives and a complicated second layer of kinship system similar to that observed in other social institutions like tribes. Courtiers appointed positions to their relatives in order to create and keep a network of their fans in the court. An example is the influential family of Shah Qoli Khan Zangane, Etemadodole of the king Sultan Hussein, which was composed of his sons Aalijah Ali QoliBeig, Sheikh Ali Khan Mir AkhorBashi and Muhammad Beig, and his son-in-law Fathali Khan DaghestaniQollarAghasiBashi (KhatunAbadi, 1973: 568). This strategy was common among the prominent officials especially those who were Etemadolsaltanah of the king Sultan Hussein.

Muhammad Qoli Khan Etemadodole attempted to protect himself against competitors and fulfill his plans by appointing a network of his relatives to court and administrative positions. A clear example is the transfer of positions to the brothers of Muhammad Qoli Khan Etemadodole. Based on the resources of the WAK Dutch Company, Flore wrote that Lezgi rebels had occupied Shirvan in 1721. The king dispatched Muhammad Beig, the elder brother of Etemadodole, to the north and appointed him as the BiglarBeig of Azerbaijan (Flore, 1986: 39). In the same year, Reza Qoli Khan Ishik Aghasi Bashi, another brother of Etemadodoleh, was appointed as the head of all serfs and servants of the king to counterattak Afghans (Flore, 1986: 79). In some cases, positions were transferred to the remote relatives of the tribe. Having been admitted to social positions due to favor of their high-status relative, these officials supported his policies. During the King Sultan Hussein’ era, Zangane and Gorjifamilies could achieve high administrative and military ranks of the Safavid state. For example, Shah Qoli Khan Zangane, Etemadodole of the King Sultan Hussein, conferred many positions to men of the Zangane tribe so that in 1109(Lunar Calendar), Muhammad Amin BeigZangane, a military commander, was awarded 600 tomans and was honored as the host of the Osmani ambassador (Nasiri, 1994: 214, 226). After a while, Rustam Khan Zangane, governor of Khaf and Jaam, was dispatched to the Osmani embassy (Nasiri, 1994: 213). Yet, a powerful kinship network could not form a unanimous state. Many courtiers spent most of their times to discover and neutralize the intrigues of other courtiers. This fact distracted their attention from state affairs. Sometimes they intrigued against their close relatives. For example, Fathali Khan QollarAghasi widely opposed his father-in-law Shah Qoli Khan Etemadodole and used every means to question his deeds and overthrow him and occupy his position. Fathali Khan accused him of misadministration. When people of Isfahan rebelled against the high price of bread, Fathali Khan used Jazayerchi troops to stimulate people and suppress opponents. On the other hand, Ali QoliBeig, the son of Shah Qoli Khan Zangane, and his brothers, Sheikh Ali Khan Mir AkhorBashi and Muhammad Beig, suppressed Jazayerchi troops (KhatunAbadi, 1973: 568). Lack of detention and questioning in these cases led to other rebellions.

Even when a powerful and stable kinship network was formed in the state, other courtiers who were ignorant of the crises in the country got jealous and fearful and plotted to overthrow the kinship system to prevent their own downfall. A clear example is the downfall and torture of Fathali Khan Etemadodoleh and his nephew Lotfali Khan Sepahsalar, so that “all commanders and politicians forgot all about Khorasan Province and unanimously aimed at overthrowing Fathali Khan. They were ignorant of Khorasan and the fate of the government” (Mostofi, 1996: 126). Downfall of one courtier was a good opportunity for others to promote their positions. At times of king’s admittance or downfall of high-level officials, several positions were distributed among courtiers. For example in 1717, Safi Qoli Beig, the QollarAghasi and Biglar Beigi of Fars province, was deprived of his numerous positions including the governance of Lar and Bandar Abbas, due to his defeat from Arabs of Masqat. By king’ decree, he was imprisoned and his possessions were confiscated. His numerous positions were distributed among courtiers such as Qeis Ali Beig, the nephew of Etemadodole- the governor of Kohgiluye (Flore, 1986: 29).
Th effect of kinship system was not restricted to conferring court positions. Good reputation and services of a courtier’s ancestors for the Safavid state acted as a valuable proof of identity and helped him promote his status and enjoy the respect of the King Sultan Hussein’s court. For example, Safi Qoli Beig Shamlu, “The Guard of the Great Diwan” whose ancestors held the same position was honored with the honorary title “Sufi of the Court of Saviors”, due to his own and his ancestors” services(Navayi, 1984: 185).

As mentioned in the related reference books, courtiers introduced their positions as the son or grandson of well-known characters. Having prominent relatives or ancestors, one could promote his status using their well reputation and services. For example during the King Sultan Hussein’s era, sons and grandsons of the king Suleiman’s courtiers could achieve some positions. For example in 1106(Lunar Calendar), Aghazivar Khan, nephew of Mehdi Qoli Khan the Ishik Aghasi Bashi of the King Suleiman’s court, was honored with the governance of Orumi and Afshar tribes(Nasiri, 1994: 80, 81). In another case in 1123(Lunar Calendar), Muhammad Qoli Beig, the son of Muhammad Moemen Khan the former Etemadodole, was appointed as the governor of Harat. He imprisoned Heidar Qoli Khan, the former governor of Harat and confiscated his possession and was admitted to the government (Khatun Abadi, 1973: 55). Inclination of some courtiers to confer positions to their relatives caused some unjustifiable actions.

Some court officials during their advanced ages attempted to transfer their positions to their sons but the king opposed their attempts. For example in 1124(Lunar Calendar), Mir Muhammad Saleh the Sheikh-al-Islam of Isfahan, decided to resign and transfer his position to his son. He further attempted to keep his own pension and deposit his son with all king’s affairs and keep his son’s priority over other clergies. This attempt angered the king and he was deprived of his position (Khatun Abadi, 1973: 555). Numerous other cases might be mentioned in this regard. For example, when Sultan Akbar, the son of the Indian Gurkani King, was dispatched; the king ordered one of his commanders to accompany him to Qandahar. But the commander left him midway and went back to court, making excuse of his disease, and selected his son as his successor. But as soon as he arrived in the court, the king caught him and confiscated his possessions (Fidalgo, 1979: 79).

III. The effect of kinship in weakness, deterioration and collapse of the Safavid state

Courtiers acted and influenced state affairs through their positions and, on this basis, supported or opposed each other. So, courtiers attempted to transfer court positions to their relatives or trusted persons to both create a support for themselves against competitors, and use the benefits of these positions. So, they tried to dispose their competitors and allies from the court so they could transfer positions to their trusted relatives and allies. As mentioned in Tohfat-al-Alam, some Safavid commanders and politicians prevented Abu Talib Fendereski, the author of Tuhat-al-Alam, from entering into the court and having a meeting with the King Sultan Hussein, due to enmity and fear of his status (Fendereski, 2009: 52).

In addition to central court positions, courtiers attempted to seize other administrative positions in different cities and provinces or transfer these positions to their relatives to impose their direct impact on state capitals. Several cases of transferring provincial positions to relatives have been mentioned in the historical resources. For example, governance of the Kohgiluyeh province was transferred to Muhammad Aali Khan, the brother of Muhammad Moemen Khan the Vizier of the Supreme Court and the governance of Bandar Abbas was transferred to Avaz Khan, the brother of Safi Qoli Beig the supervisor of the houses (Nasiri, 1994: 257, 273). Transfer of provincial governance to relatives prevented people from pleading to the Safavid court against provincial authorities since courtiers strongly supported their relatives. As Flore puts it, Ibrahim Khan, the Biglarbeigi of Kerman, was the nephew of Ibrahim Agha, the head of white Khaje servants, who was defeated in his war with Baluch tribe in 1716. To compensate for this defeat, Ibrahim Khan imposed heavy taxes on people of Kerman and obtained compulsory loans from the Dutch WAK Company officials to prevent Baluch tribe from plundering Kerman province by paying bribes to them. Dutch tradesmen did not dare to plead to Etemadodole, due to his uncle’s authority, because he would suddenly show the plea to Ibrahim Agha (Flore, 1992: 99-101). Another strategy of kinship system was appointing young inexperienced relatives to crucial positions.

Sometimes, courtiers’ sons occupied their fathers’ positions regardless of their age and experience. This often occurred when courtiers were promoted to higher positions and their former positions were transferred to their sons. For example in 1722, PrinceTahmasb Mirza sent a letter to the king. He wrote in his letter that the king had unjustly fired Tuchibashi because the prince had prevented him from returning to the city and had selected him as his deputy as a reward. Having read the letter, the king appointed the son of Tuchibashi, a 9 or 10 year old child, as the new Tuchibashi. Another aspect of the substitution of fathers by their young children should be mentioned.

The young children of courtiers could inherit their fathers’ positions by enjoying the support and recommendation of their high-rank relatives. This happened when Safavid governors and officials were killed in wars. For example in 1716, people of Shirvan rebelled in Qafghaz and killed Muhammad Ali Khan Sepahsalar, the governor of the city and the nephew of Etemadodoleh. The king appointed his eight year old son as successor and Sepahsalar of Tabriz (Flore, 1992: 65). Appointing children to high positions was not restricted to
substitution of fathers and included substitution of other relatives. For example in 1717, when Ibrahim Khan was fired, Rustam Khan Qularar AghasiBashi became the BiglarBeig of Kerman who, in turn, sent his fourteen year old son to Kerman as proxy (Flore, 1992: 108-109). As repeatedly mentioned in the historical resources of the King Sultan Hussein’ era, the king consulted the Safavid commanders and politicians prior to making military and administrative decisions. In this regard, recommendation of officials was the main means of obtaining court positions. Most of the times, people were recommended by their relatives and allies. For example, Mahmud Beig enjoyed the recommendation of his brother Muhammad Reza Beig, the head of Akhorbashi, and was appointed as Yasavol of the Eram assembly (Nasiri, 1974: 55). In case a person did not enjoy the recommendation of officials, he could lose his position and possessions. These recommendations brought about negative consequences such as ignorance of the distorted situation of the country.

Downfall of a courtier also affected his relatives and led to wide changes in court positions. Generally, courtiers benefited from overthrowing and murdering prominent officials. The unanimous attempt of courtiers could lead to downfall of prominent figures and the prosecution of his and his relatives’ possessions. For example in 1720, Hakimibashi, Mullabashi, Qurchibashi and Yuzbashi, the intimate servants of the king, accused Etemadodoleh Fathali Khan Daghhestani of intrigue to encounter his influence and status. As a result, Fathali Khan and his nephew Lotfali Khan Sepahsalar lost their positions, eyes and properties. The plotting courtiers managed to substitute those two figures with their own relatives:

Ahmad Agha, Yuzbashi of intimate servants who had been arrested in a fight with Fathali Khan Moezi Elayh and had been sent to jail in Shiraz, was appointed as Mirshekar and Chapar of Shiraz. Muhammad Qoli Khan Shamlu. Qurchibashi, was appointed as chancellor of the court. On the other hand, Sheikh Ali Khan Mirshekarbashi and Muhammad Ali Khan Makri were appointed as Qurchibashi and Tofangchibashi Aghasi, respectively (Mostofi, 1996: 125).

Transferring important positions and jobs to a limited range of relatives created a closed static structure in the Safavid court. As mentioned in the historical references, a number of courtiers during the King Sultan Hussein constantly held political positions. As a result, no one could request for or obtain a position without having the recommendation of courtiers or passing through indirect paths. Although many court titles- such as “Agha” for Khajesarayan, “Khan” for commanders, and “Mirza” for bureaucrats- represented personal merits, but there existed no strict line between positions and jobs. So, there was a wide overlapping between the official duties and authorities of the officials. For example, some military figures such as Fathali Khan QulararAghasi and Muhammad Qoli Khan Shamlu Qurchibashi served as court commanders. They could occupy the position “Etemadodoleh” by plotting against other courtiers.

IV. Conclusion

The first characteristic of the kinship system in the king Sultan Hussein’ court was appointing relatives in different positions. In this regard, courtiers concealed the illegal actions of their relatives to guarantee their status. The only exception was personal properties which led to disputes among relatives. The courtiers’ competition to occupy different positions led to both professional-political overlapping, and interference of courtiers in each other’s’ affairs. It also prevented the presence of a third party and dynamics of court forces. So, the function of kinship system in causing court disputes was a long-term cause of the passive policy of the government in face of different local crises such as Afghans’ rebellion, which paved the way for the downfall of the Safavid state.

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