

Role of Military Elite in Managing Iran's Rebellions of Safavid Shah Safi's Time (1629-1642)

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v4-i7/1007>

Published Date: 15 July 2014

Abstract

The Safavids are Iran's first national government after the fall of the Sasanids, i.e. since the Islamic conquest until 1501. Shah Safi was the 6th Safavid king (1629-1642). He was the grandson and successor of Shah Abbas the first. At the beginning of his reign, he faced some rebellions. These rebellions had various causes. The route of these rebellions could be assumed to be in the reforms done by Shah Abbas which lead to the discontent of a number of the elite ruling groups. Of the most important of these rebellions were Shah Gharib's rebellion in Gilan, Shir Khan's in Kandahar, and Davood Khan's in Georgia which occurred in the first four years of Shah Safi's reign. When acceding to power, Shah Safi was a young king. Thus he could not overcome the rebellions without the assistance of astute advisers. In order to overcome the rebellions, he used the military elite who were a strong arm to him all through his reign.

Saroo Khan, Alimardan Khan, And Rostam Khan were three elite military commanders who managed to assist the young king and help strengthen his power. No doubt these elite were very precious to the king because without their assistance the king could not overcome the various problems he was facing at the beginning of his reign.

This study attempts to identify the role of the military elite in overcoming and managing the rebellions which occurred at the beginning of Shah Safi's reign.

Keyword: Army Commander, Commander-in-Chief, Shah Safi, The Safavids

Introduction

In a society, the elite are divided into different groups including religious, tribal, bureaucratic, military, etc. groups. The elite comprise “individuals and groups influential in the historical action of a society by the power they achieve or effects the have or decisions they make or ideas, feeling and emotions they create” (Roosheh, 2005: 121). Each of these elite members could by themselves be either useful or detrimental to their government.

As a significant group in the society, the military has great influence in political changes. The military is headed by experienced, elite people who can have great positive influence for the government if the government could manage their potentials efficiently.

The Safavids were one of the most influential dynasties in Iran’s history and ruled from 1501 to 1723. Researchers and historians divide this era into two periods: the first period dates from 1501 to 1632, i.e. from the reign of Shah Ismail the first until the death of Shah Abbas the first which is considered the dynasty’s heyday; the second period dates 1632 to 1729, i.e. from the reign of Shah Safi until the fall of the Safavids. Shah Abbas’s death in 1632 is the beginning of the second period of the life of the Safavid dynasty. At the beginning of his reign, Shah Safi, the young king who had succeeded his grandfather, faced two major problems. The first problem was that the reforms done in Shah Abbas’s time had led to the discontent of some groups in the Iranian society and therefore, after Shah Abbas’s death, these groups were trying to rebel. The second problem was that the new king was unwilling to rule over the society by using the elite employed by the previous king and intended to replace the old elite with a new one. This, too, became troublesome and gave rise to some rebellions in this period. Thus, in the first four years of his reign, Shah Safi faced three major rebellions. These rebellions took place in three areas of Iran, i.e. the northern, the north-western and the eastern regions.

Appropriate management is required to overcome rebellions. If rebellions are not controlled appropriately, they may cause major problems for the government and may lead to the collapse of a dynasty or the secession of a part of a country. Wise elite officials could help appropriately manage these threats. That is why in order to overcome the obstacles to his fledgling government, Shah Safi appealed to the military elite in the hope that this group of elite could save his regime by employing appropriate methods.

This study attempts to investigate how these rebellions were instigated, how they were done and what their nature was. The study also tries to answer the question as to what was the role and function of the military elite in tackling these rebellions.

Gharib Shah Gilani’s rebellion

Gilan state is located in the north of Iran and to the south of the Caspian Sea. This state has always enjoyed relative autonomy and this caused tension between the Safavids and Gilan’s rulers. One of the most important rebellions which took place in Gilan in the Safavid period before the accession of Shah Safi was Khan Ahmad Gilani’s rebellion. He ran his rebellion in the reign of Shah Tahmasb (1578-1588). He was imprisoned by Shah Tahmasb but in the reign of Muhammad Khodabeneh (1578-1588), Tahmasb’s son, because of the family relation between Khan Ahmad and the new king’s wife, was released and reappointed to Gilan’s government. In the reign of the Safavid Shah Abbas (1588-1629), he again revolted. In order to insure his independence, Khan Ahmad established relations with the Ottoman government (Torkaman, 1938: 449). However, he was eventually defeated and took refuge in the Ottoman. He died in 1597 in Baghdad (ibid, 529).

Because of Shah Abbas's great violence in Gilan, and his erroneous economic policies in this state, people experienced great hardship and awaited an opportunity to rebel against the central government. This opportunity was given to them in 1629 after Shah Abbas's death. After Shah Abbas the first, his son, Shah Safi, acceded to the throne. People in Gilan rebelled against the new king. Russian historians consider this as one of the greatest public rebellions in the 17th century (Pigoloskaya, N. V. et al., 1948: 554). Due to the enforcement of the particular lands policy by Shah Abbas the first, and the continuation of its enforcement by the new king, Gilan had fallen within the group of particular states. According to this policy, land revenues were directly sent to the king's treasury. Therefore, the government got a monopoly on silk which was the most important farming product in the state. This led to widespread discontent among Gilan's farmers. Local Authorities, owners and rulers, too, joined the rebellion to reach their own political objectives. The rebels appointed a person called Kalenjar Sultan, the son of Jamshid Khan Rashti, as their head. He was one of the old rulers of Gilan. He was given the epithet 'Adelshah' (meaning the just king). He was also known as Gharibshah.

The causes of the rebellion could be summarized in the following items:

1. The independence-seeking mood of Gilan's people who had always been ruled over by local rulers. When Shah Abbas adopted the centralist policy and dismissed the local authorities, the descendants of these local authorities and Gilan's people started seeking an opportunity to regain their independence.
2. The death of Shah Abbas the first, the powerful Iranian king, had given Gilan's people the assumption that the Safavids' power have diminished in the process of transferring the power to the new king. That is why they tried to take advantage of this weakness.
3. Shah Abbas' economic policy which had increased the pressure of taxes on Gilan's people.
4. Gilan's rebels' motivation caused by Gharib Shah's initial advances. These victories were mostly caused by the local government's surprise attack.

In the month of Sha'ban, in 1629, having gained control over Rasht, the rebels started their rebellion. They took control of all the silk taken from the people which amounted to 300,000 tomans (Foumani Gilani, 1974: 263; Torkaman, 1938: 15-16). The official reports indicate that since the rebels were afraid of their future, they robbed all the places they went and killed a lot of people (Khajegilsfahani, 1989: 50).

After Rasht, more important cities (Fouman, Lahijan, LashtNesha, Langroud) were conquered one after the other by Gharib Shah. Gharib Shah's successive victories and the importance of Gilan state caused Shah Safi to dispatch some forces from the center to overcome the rebels. A number of the military elite headed by Saroo Khan were sent to the region to put down the uprisings. In a battle which took place in Koochesfahan region near Rasht, Gharib Shah was defeated. "The defeated fled to the jungles and Saroo Khan's victorious soldiers kept pursuing and killing them from Koochesfahan to LashtNesha which is about 4 miles" (Khajegilsfahani, 1989: 53). Thus Gharib Shah's revolt was put down and Gharib Shah was executed by the fire squad in Isfahan, the Safavid capital.

The role of the military elite in the suppression of Gharib Shah Gilani's rebellion

What is certain is that appropriate management of political, social, economic, etc. crises in every society could result in the establishment of peace in that society. Military uprisings are crises able to cause disruption in the ruling system, lead to the secession of a part of a country, and in a more serious case, result in the collapse of a dynasty. Therefore, when faced with

such crises, the governments quickly seek strategies to overcome them. Perhaps the two fundamental strategies for tackling these rebellions are either to accede to the rebels' demands or suppress them. Normally, when the rebellion is local and regional and the rebels demand the secession of the region and intend to oppose the government, the government of the time would seek military suppression of the rebellion.

Gharib Shah Gilani's rebellion was a military uprising with the primary purpose of gaining independence or a sort of autonomy for Gilan. Therefore the new king sought military strategies to suppress this rebellion. Or perhaps because Shah Safi had just acceded to throne, he wanted to use the suppression of this rebellion as a deterrent to possible future rebellions so that the rebels know what consequences it will have for them.

Saroo Khan, as the Safavid commander-in-chief, had the main role in suppressing Gharib Shah's rebellion. Having had the experience of ruling over Astarā which was an area close to Gilan, he was assigned the task of suppressing the rebels. Gorgin Sultan and Muhammad Khan, serving as his two strong assistants, were assigned the duty of providing help for the commander-in-chief. What led to Saroo Khan's success was creativity, power of management and precise political and military plans. The following are some of the measures taken by him:

1. Establishing unity among the local forces loyal to the king and then unifying these forces with the forces sent from the center (Hedayat, 8th Ed., 1993: 331) which strengthened government forces. Saroo Khan established peace among local forces which had old strife and used this peace in his own favor. This caused a great number of people in Gilan to support Saroo Khan.
2. In order to open up divisions in Gharib Shah's forces, Saroo Khan took advantage of the disparity of Gharib Shah's forces. He used his spies to agitate the poor class against the owners and the grandees. He achieved this goal too and, in Fooman, the rebels affiliated to the poor class tried to burn the grandees' houses.
3. Paying money to some local authorities who were hesitant about joining or not joining the rebels. This caused these authorities to support the central government's forces. Saroo Khan even paid money to some of the heads of the insurgence to join him. And this opened up divisions among the insurgents.
4. After capturing the first city of Gilan region, i.e. LashtNesha, Saroo Khan massacred its people and enslaved women and girls and killed each insurgent upon capturing (Foomani Gilani, 1974: 297). This created fear among people in other cities of Gilan and people lost their desire to resist.
5. Despite the disagreement of some of his associates, in order to create panic among the insurgent masses, Saroo Khan used the most modern weapons, i.e. the rifles he had bought from the European countries. This was another cause of his victory.

These measures taken by Saroo Khan who was Iran's commander-in-chief caused Gharib Shah's rebellion to be suppressed with the least costs for the Safavid regime.

Shir Khan Afghan's rebellion

The second most important rebellion which took place in Shah Safi's reign was Shir Khan Afghan's rebellion. This rebellion took place in 1631 in Kandahar and lasted until 1632. Kandahar is located in today's Afghanistan. This state is considered one of the beylerbey areas in the Safavid period and the Safavids and the Indian Mughals were always fighting over its ownership. At that time, Alimardan Khan Zik who was appointed by the king was the ruler

of that region. The mentioned rebellion took place in Fusanj area near Kandahar among a group of Afghans called the Kakeries. The leader of this group was a person named Shir Khan Afghan.

Shir Khan Afghan was the ruler of Fusanjin the time of Shah Abbas the first. After the death of Ganjai Khan, the beylerbey of Kandahar, Shir Khan afghan expected himself to be appointed as ruler but the Shah appointed Alimardan Khan, the son of Ganjali Khan as the ruler of Kandahar. This led to Shir Khan's discontent. He kept attacking commercial caravans traveling to India in order to create unease in Kandahar. The tension between Shir Khan and Alimardan Khan persisted and Shah Abbas did not attempt to settle it. When Shah Safi acceded to power, Shir Khan continued his behavior so much so that the authorities of Indian areas sent written objections to Alimardan Khan about "Shir Khan's wrongdoing and transgression to their areas" (Valeh Ghazvini, 2001:90). Impairing the region's security on the one hand and the economic significance of controlling the commercial path to India on the other caused Alimardan Khan, the Safavid commander-in-chief, who was also Kandahar's governor, to resolve to suppress this insurgence. In the battle which then took place, Shir Khan was defeated by Alimardan Khan's forces and went to the Mughal's court through Multan (Torkaman, 1998: 75; Valeh Ghazvini, 2001: 90). Shir Khan hoped to receive assistance from the Indians but the Indian governor did not help him to run another rebellion. Thus Shir Khan resolved to rebel by himself. Then, with the help of the Afghans in Fusanj, he rose in rebellion for the second time. "Again corruption and insecurity in the routes frightened the residents of that area" (Valeh Ghazvini, 2001: 92). The commander-in-chief (Alimardan Khan) was assigned the task of suppressing this insurgence. A battle called *Kootle Panj Mard* took place in which Shir Khan was again defeated and fled (Valeh Ghazvini, 2001:92; Torkaman, 1998: 76). It is assumed that Shir Khan later fled to India and died in there.

The role of the military elite in suppressing Shir Khan Afghan's rebellion

Alimardan Khan, the Safavid commander-in-chief, had the main role in suppressing Shir Khan's rebellion. Shir Khan's rebellion did not aim at subverting the Safavids or separating a part of the Iranian soil. Rather, it was a kind of rivalry between the local elite, the rivalry between the governor of Fusanj (Shir Khan) and the governor of Kandahar (Alimardan Khan). Alimardan Khan's measures to suppress Shir Khan's insurgence are as follows:

1. Attracting some Afghan tribes which were opposed to Shir Khan such as Abdali tribe who resided in Herat.
2. Fortifying Kandahar's castle in order to prevent Shir Khan's likely attacks.
3. Attempting to ally with some of the Indian governors and prevent their alliance with Shir Khan Afghan (Torkaman, 1998:75). Of course Shir Khan, too, unsuccessfully tried to ally with Indian governors.
4. Organizing powerful forces to suppress Shir Khan's measures (Valeh Ghazvini, 2001:93).

These measures are of the most measures taken by Alimardan Khan before the battle with Shir Khan. After the battle and Shir Khan's defeat, the commander-in-chief took new measures to prevent future riots which are as follows:

1. He assigned some Qizilbash forces with the task of protecting the Indian commercial caravans. These guards were responsible for the security of the caravans traveling from Kandahar to India.
2. After Shir Khan's escape, Alimardan Khan attacked Fusanj, Shir Khan's abode, and captured it and take possession of everything in there.

3. The commander-in-chief arrested all Shir Khan's brothers, cousins, etc. and sent them to Kandahar.
4. Alimardankhan punished the group of Afghans who had supported Shir Khan in his rebellion and killed their leaders.
5. After conquering Fusanj, Alimardan Khan appointed some of his forces to control that place.

The above measures taken by the commander-in-chief strengthened the Safavid authority in Iran's eastern regions. Due to these measures, the commercial routes leading to India experienced peace again and Alimardan Khan strengthened and stabilized his position as Kandahar's governor. The creativity and high management power of a military elite member (Alimardan Khan) led to more stabilization of the Safavids' position in the east of Iran.

Davood Khan Gorgian's rebellion

DavoodKkhan's rebellion occurred in 1633. Located north of Iran, Georgia was one of the four most important areas of Iran. This area was the main provider of Iran's military forces. In order to carry out his military reforms, Shah Abbas received assistance from residents of Caucasus and Georgia. He disciplined these people into a new military force called the Qolaman and the Qollars. People in this force could gradually reach higher posts. One of these people is Allahverdi Khan. He was from Caucasus and first was appointed as the head of the Gholaman in the time of Shah Abbas and then became the commander of the Iranian army in 1596. He was also given the beylerbey post of Fars state (Jenabadi, 1999: 716-732; MonajemYazdi, 1987: 150). Because of his proficiency in this post, he was favored by Shah Abbas and, after his death, his post was given to his son, Imamgholi .Allahverdi Khan had another son named Davood Khan who, too, was the Beylerbey of Karabakh, Ganja, Aran and the leader of the Qajar tribe (Khajegilsfahani, 1989: 137; Torkaman, 1988: 109).

The character under study here is Davood Khan who was appointed as the governor of Georgia by Shah Abbas. There were two important tribes: Undiladze and Bagration. Davood Khan belonged to the Undiladze tribe. Davood Khan was appointed as the governor of Georgia when he allied with the Georgian opposition against the Safavid government. One of the opposition members was Tahmoores, the governor of Kakheti. Davood Khan did not dare to rise in rebellion as long as Shah Abbas was alive but when Shah Safi acceded to power, unlike the customs, DavoodKhan did not meet him until 1632, i.e. three years after Shah Safi's accession. This was considered as an offence to Shah Safi. In 1632, when Shah Safi was attacking Baghdad, Davood Khan met him and the first sparks of disagreement were made between them (Khajegilsfahani, 1989). Davood Khan's rebellion had many causes. On the one hand, these factors were rooted in the power conflict in the Safavid court one of the consequences of which was the dismissal of the governors of Shah Abbas's time. "On the other hand, they were rooted in the arrogance and hegemonism of Davood Khan who tried to take advantage of the chaotic conditions after Shah Abbas's death and the beginning years of Shah Safi's reign for his purposes." (Thavagheb, 2003: 123). The reasons behind Davood Khan's rebellion could be briefly stated as follows: Davood Khan's fear of the murders and massacres that Shah Safi was committing in the beginning of his reign. Shah Safi killed all those who were loyal to the previous king (Shah Abbas) and Davood Khan thought sooner or later he will be killed too. Another reason for Davood Khan's rebellion was the discontent of the Ghajar tribe with the leadership of a non-Ghajar person over the Ghajar tribe because of which the Ghajars began to defame Davood Khan and make the king pessimistic of him (ValehGhazvini, 2001: 140). Another reason for Davood Khan's rebellion was that in a meeting

with the king in Baghdad, Davood Khan had satirically ridiculed Khosromirza's accession to power and his appointment as the leader of the Gholamans. This irritated the king so that he dismissed Davood Khan from the meeting (Giotashoily, 2005: 83). The discontent of the Georgian Bigraton tribe with Davood Khan and their defamation of Davood Khan's character before the king made the king pessimistic about him.

Imamgholi Khan, Davood Khan's brother, had great power in Fars state. One of the sons of the former king (Shah Abbas) was close to Imamgholi Khan. Claiming that he intended to help Shah Abbas's son to accede to power with the help of his brother, he instigated the rebellion in 1633 and invited the neighboring governors to join him. Because of Davood Khan's claim, Shah Safi had more determination to suppress the rebellion. In fact, Davood Khan intended to use his brother's position to achieve his own goals. Therefore, according to the Iranian and non-Iranian sources, Imamgholi did not intend to rebel against Shah Safi at all (Olearius, 1990: 732; Tavernier 1990: 518-519; VelehGhazvini, 2001: 146; Khajegilsfahani, 1989:145).

In his first measure, Shah Safi killed Imamgholi Khan and his two sons. Imamgholi was killed both in order to weaken Davood Khan's rebellion and to continue the policy of eliminating the elite affiliated to the former king (Shah Abbas). Shah Safi's second measure was to send Khosromirza, the leader of the court's Gholaman, and Rostam Khan, the new Safavid commander-in-chief, to suppress the rebellion. They were both Georgian and were from the Bigraton tribe.

The role of the military elite in suppressing Davood Khan's rebellion

Rostam Khan, the commander-in-chief, was assigned with the task of suppressing Davood Khan. He was one of the closest people to the king. In fact, Rostam Khan relied upon the new military elite who had emerged after Shah Abbas's death and replaced the old elite. In order to defeat Davood Khan, Rostam Khan, the commander-in-chief, took some measures some of which are as follows:

1. Establishing relations with the Ghajar tribe residing in Ganja and Karabakh and appointing Muhammad Gholi Khan Ghajar as their head. This measure, i.e. appointing a member of the Ghajar tribe as the head of this tribe, caused this tribe to be totally loyal to Rostam Khan and his forces and play a significant role in defeating Davood Khan.
2. Defeating the discontented and establishing peace in Georgia.
3. Establishing friendly relations with the leaders of Kakheti and Kartli. This led to the alliance of the noblemen of those places with Rostam Khan and their breaking with Tahmoores who was their governor and was Davood Khan's main ally. This also forced Tahmoores to leave the eastern Georgia (Torkaman, 1938: 117-118). "The reason for the Georgian noblemen's and ruling class's support and obeisance of Rostam Khan was his wise policies and reasonable compromise with the Iranian court which saved Georgia from widespread massacres and robbery and established peace and serenity for a relatively long time in that land" (Thavagheb, 2003: 134).
4. Davood Khan lacked a public base in Georgia and Rostam Khan took advantage of this appropriately and managed to destroy him. In fact, Davood Khan's rebellion was an attempt made by the elite to gain political power, not a public insurrection against the central government.
5. At the beginning of the rebellion, Davood Khan sent letters to Iran's north-western governors asking them to help the rebellion. But before that, Rostam Khan had allied with those governors and the rebel forces had become even weaker.

6. After Davood Khan's defeat and his flee, in order to prevent his future rebellion, Rostamkhan built two fortified castles, one in Kakheta and the other in Kartil, appointed guards to protect them and equipped them with military equipment (Torkaman, 1938: 118).

Davood Khan was eventually defeated and took refuge in Ottoman and died in there. No doubt the leadership of a military elite member named Rostam Khan, who had a charismatic character among the Georgian people, over the Safavid forces and his measures had a significant role in suppressing this rebellion.

Investigation of these three rebellions in the beginning of Shah Safi's reign shows that three military commanders, i.e. Sarookkhan, Alimardan Khan and Rostam Khan had had a significant role in returning peace to the Safavid regime. In fact, the new king (Safi) who was young could not strengthen his position and continue his reign without the assistance of these people. The existence of such elite at the leading positions of the government strengthens governments and helps them to progress. This was lacking in the end of the Safavid regime which was a weak point of the Safavids and caused this dynasty to be easily destroyed in 1723 by a number of Afghans who did not have appropriate weapons.

Conclusions:

In the beginning years of Shah Safi's reign, between 1629 and 1633, when some rebellions took place, Shah Safi was lucky that there were three elite commanders, i.e. Sarook Khan, Alimardan Khan and Rostam Khan, who could suppress these rebellions with appropriate management, proficiency and measures.

The three rebellions were of different natures. Gilan's rebellion was an independence-seeking rebellion. Kandahar's rebellion was caused by rivalry among the elite, and Georgia's rebellion was a rebellion where the elite appealed to military measures to protect their position. However, what was common among these three rebellions was their spontaneous threat for Shah Safi's fledgling government. Perhaps if these rebellions were not appropriately managed, they would cause disruption in the ruling system and with development of their geographic scope they could lead to Shah Safi's fall, or even worse, the Safavids' collapse.

Non-concurrency of these three rebellions provided the central government with the opportunity to take its time to suppress them. The high proficiency of the elite military commanders in opening up divisions in the rebel forces in all three rebellions is apparent. In fact, this was one of the war tactics of the military elite in all the three rebellions. Agitating the masses against the insurgents by bribing and threatening them was another strategy used by the military elite. Of course it should be noted that providing a disciplined army with modern weapons led to the faster victory of the government forces.

Anyway, the military elite are the elite class who could be both beneficial and detrimental to the government. Because of their high proficiency and high commanding power, they can play a significant role in organizing rebellions against the government or suppressing such rebellions. In the investigated period, this group of the elite had a positive function for the government and its actions strengthened the Safavid dynasty.

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