

The Chamber of Commerce and Internal Conflicts among Merchants of Bushehr in the Early 1950s

Soheila Torabi Farsani

Associate Professor of History, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad

Introduction

Up until the Constitutional Revolution, the presence of foreign competitors, who were strengthened in the so-called “concessions era,” was more and more evident due to political and economic shifts that changed the traditional fabric of commerce in Iran: social upheavals and a lack of social security, on one hand; and a lack of positive action on the part of the state to protect the interests of Iranian merchants against the intrusion of foreign capital, on the other. In the immediate decades prior to the Constitutional Revolution, these factors resulted in a shift in the process of commercial activities conducted by merchants. Thus, on top of engagement in diversified economic activities, merchants also tried to attain an independent social identity.

Soheila Torabi Farsani is an associate professor of history at Islamic Azad University, Najafabad Branch. Her research interests are the economic history at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, historical sociology, the social history of Iran, and women’s studies. Her publications include *From Merchants Representatives Council to Iran Chamber of Commerce* (Entesharat Majlis Shoraye Eslami, 2013) and *Women in Transition from the Tradition to Modernity* (Nashre Niloofar, 2018). Her Persian translation of a collection of essays by Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi was published under the title *Social Classes, State and Revolution in Iran* (Nashre Niloofar, 2008).

At the time, state bodies such as the Ministry of Trade had become a financial resource for the minister of trade, rather than a resource that would see to merchants' pleas.¹ The Ministry of Trade charged every merchant a sum of money for every plea.² Because the position of minister of trade was attained by giving a large sum of money to the shah and his courtiers, that position was more like a resource to make money than a position designed to help merchants.³ The minister, too, assigned the affairs of merchants in the provinces to minor officials in return for a sum of money as a "gift."⁴ Ultimately, when extortions on the part of the minister of trade became intolerable, merchants protested and sent a plea to Naseroldin Shah himself, demanding establishment of an independent body named *Majlis-i Vokkalay-i Tojjar* (Merchants' Representatives Council), which was proclaimed by a royal decree in 1883.⁵ This council was the first-ever merchants' independent body in the Qajar era, and it was active in upholding the merchants' mutual interests, preventing state officials from interfering in merchants' internal affairs, and seeing to their pleas.

The idea behind such a council—composed of merchants' representatives who would make decisions on merchants' behalf and issue verdicts accepted by them—was to set up an institution that would act for the mutual benefit of merchants. This differed from the prevalent traditional ways of pleading to state bodies or the person of *Reisoltojjar* (head of the merchants' guild). The council's constitution clearly stated that one task of the council was to see to merchants' pleas and arbitrate in the cases of their claims.⁶ At this time, merchants had gained such social

¹Abbas Mirza Molkara, *Biography*, ed. Abdolhossein Navaei (Tehran: Babak, 1958), 168.

²Abdolah Mostofi, *My Autobiography or Social and Administrative History of Qajar Era*, vol. II (Tehran: Zavvar, 1991), 139.

³Mohammad Hassan Khan Etemadolsaltaneh, *Diaries*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1971), 308, 377.

⁴Molkara, *Biography*, 168–69.

⁵Mohammad Hasan Aminolzarb to Naseroldin Shah, AH 12 Shavval 1301/5 August 1884, Aminolzarb petitions to the shah files, private library of Dr. Hossein Mahdavi. The letter is mentioned in Ferydoon Adamiyat and Homa Nategh, *Social and Political and Economic Ideas in Unpublished Texts from Qajar Era* (Tehran: Aghah, 1977), 308–9.

⁶Adamiyat and Nategh, *Social and Political and Economic Ideas*, 335, 336–40.

maturity that they had managed to set up an independent institution to solve their problems—a civil institution that would in due time help them not only to form their collective identity and thus solve their own problems, but also to organize a collective course of action in the face of state officials who would try to encroach on merchants' interests.

This course of action was also followed after the constitutional movement began. Merchants had high hopes of the new political order and expected that the arbitration of the trade court would be in their favor and provide them with financial security. Therefore, the merchants' association, one among many associations which had sprung up after the Constitutional Revolution, maintained relations with *Majlis* (parliament) deputies.⁷ The merchants' association had branches in provinces and also at overseas centers of commerce, and was actively engaged in protecting merchants' interests. At the first *Majlis*, merchants participated actively and pursued their interests there, and the law pertaining to trade associations was discussed. However, that was the one and only occasion on which merchants' demands were addressed at the *Majlis*.⁸

Many factors combined to provide a basis for the merchants to strengthen their internal class structure: the increase in violence in Iranian society, the culmination of anarchy and insecurity immediately after the victory of the Constitutional Revolution, and the bombardment of the *Majlis* and destruction of constitutional institutions; a decrease of merchants' political influence in the second *Majlis*; the occurrence of World War I; and a culmination of political, social, and economic crises, widespread insecurity and strengthening of divergent social forces, and the weakness of the central government and incompetence of the *Majlis*. After the end of World War I, on the 12 Rabiolavval AH 1338/1920, the constitution of 'Heiat-i Ettahadiye-i Tojjar (Merchants' Union) was ratified, and the union was formally founded under Chair Haj Mohammad Hossein Aminolzarb. On top of its commercial and industrial goals, the

⁷*Habl al-Matin*, Number 145, 19 Jumadi II AH 1325/30 July 1907, 3.

⁸Muzakirat-i Majlis, Dawrah 1, 5 Rabiolavval AH 1326/7 April 1908, 9 Rabiolavval AH 1326/11 April 1908, 16 Rabiolavval AH 1326/18 April 1908, 4 Rabiolsani AH 1326/6 May 1908 (Tehran: Majlis Publications, 1946), particularly on 499, 505, 512, 537.

Merchants' Union aimed to solve commercial issues arising between merchants, and this was enshrined in its constitution.⁹

The union had a solid organizational structure with contacts all over Iran, and had its own internal regulatory mandates. Its solid organization and importance were particularly evident in the commercial skirmishes with the Soviet government over its trade restrictions on Iranian merchants, skirmishes that became known as Nahazat-i Eqtesad (Economic Movement). The collection of letters and announcements of the Economic Movement in protest to the Soviet government showed a similar and collective position on the part of merchants within a civil institution called the merchants' union, which was separate from 'Heiat-i Ettahadiye-i Tojjar'.¹⁰

In the Pahlavi era, too, merchants were totally aware of the necessity for having and upholding trade associations. But as the centralizing Pahlavi state pursued initiatives to bring every sphere of social activity under its control, the Ministry of Public Works was called upon to found the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, according to a law ratified by the cabinet. In May 1926, the Tehran Chamber of Commerce was officially founded on the basis of an internal merchants' election, and thus, the 'Heiat-i Ettahadiye-i Tojjar' was transformed from a non-governmental organization into a pseudo-state body which acted as the functioning arm of the Ministry of Public Works, and in effect as liaison to establish relations between the ministry and merchants. For this same reason, the Tehran Chamber of Commerce was financed by the government, and this financial setup may have caused the delay in founding other chambers of commerce.¹¹ After a while, the government announced that it could not afford to finance the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, and merchants themselves had to come up with financial resources for

⁹"Constitution of Tehran Merchants' Union," 12 Rabiolavval AH 1338/14 April 1908, pp. 1–2, Merchants' Union documents, private library of Dr. Hossein Mahdavi.

¹⁰For more information about the Economic Movement, see Soheila Torabi Farsani, "Iran–Soviet Trade Relations and the Organization of Economic Movement in Early Years of Pahlavi Era," *Isfahan University Literature and Humanities Faculty Magazine*, no. 30–31 (2002): 143–72.

¹¹"Mutafariqat," *Habl al-Matin*, Sal 35, Number 14–15 (24 Ramadan AH 1345/29 March 1927), 30–32, particularly 30.

that purpose.¹² From then on, the chamber of commerce increasingly functioned as an executive agent and tended to pursue regulations made by the ministry.¹³

Prelude to the Foundation of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce

In 1929, there were attempts to found chambers of commerce in large and middle-sized cities and Iran's major commercial centers. On 2 October 1930, the law pertaining to founding chambers of commerce was passed; up to this time, merchants in every city and commercial center were organized in their respective unions and were totally out of the reach of state executive bodies, seeing to their own affairs in an autonomous manner and according to guild solidarity norms. The first article of this law stated that in order to found a chamber of commerce in a major commercial center, merchants first had to send an application letter to the Ministry of National Economy. But seemingly, merchants already organized in their unions did not show any real inclination to that effect. Thus, nearly a month after the ratification of the law, the Ministry of National Economy, in an October 1930 letter to the Ministry of the Interior, asked for assistance: "With all due respect, please ask provincial governors in every city and commercial center to invite the more established merchants and to inform them of regulations pertaining to chambers of commerce law [. . .] and persuade the gentlemen [. . .] to apply for foundation of the chamber of commerce in their respective cities [. . .] and ask the governors to send on the application letters, as soon as possible, through the interior ministry, or directly to this ministry."¹⁴

Even so, it seemed that merchants were reluctant to disband their civil organizations and gather in a state-controlled or pseudo-governmental

¹²Ministry of Finance to Ministry of Public Works, 30 Azar AH 1305/22 December 1926, Ministry of Finance, [240]/288/42(42), National Library and Archives of Iran, Tehran; Majlis to Chamber of Commerce, n.d., gh-115515, Bonyad Mostazafan Archives, Tehran.

¹³Premier office's to Ministry of Public Works and Ministry of Trade, 4 Bahman AH 1307/24 January 1929, 9/104001, National Library and Archives of Iran; Premier's office to Ministry of Trade and Ministry of Public Works, 8 Mehr AH 1308/17 September 1929, [240]/9/104001, National Library and Archives of Iran.

¹⁴Ministry of National Economy to Ministry of the Interior, 6 Aban AH 1309/28 October 1930, 8720/5468, National Library and Archives of Iran. All translations are mine.

institution. Two months after the passing of the law and one month after the dispatch of the letter to the Ministry of the Interior, the fact that merchants would still not send up application letters to found chambers of commerce left the Ministry of National Economy no choice but to send yet another letter in November 1930 to the Ministry of the Interior. This second letter, while mentioning the previous letter, stated: “As up to this moment there is no clear sign of what steps respected governors have taken [. . .] please ask them to expedite their actions as to the effect, and get the application letters prepared immediately and dispatch them to the central offices.”¹⁵

In spite of reluctance and disregard on the part of merchants, ultimately chambers of commerce were founded in every city and major commercial center. Bushehr, a major port city and an important commercial center, saw its chamber of commerce founded as early as 1929. In a document dated September 1933 and listing cities where chambers of commerce had already been founded, Bushehr is listed as item number ten of thirty-six cities.¹⁶

Bushehr Chamber of Commerce and Its Various Functions

After the capitulation and occupation of Iran by the allies during World War II, which resulted in Reza Shah Pahlavi abdicating the throne, there commenced a twelve-year period beginning in September 1941 and ending in August 1953. This period entailed a process of increasing weakness on the part of the central government, and a proportionate prevalence of relative liberties in the country.

The more governmental executive bodies lost their power and centralizing function, the more autonomous agency in political, social, and economic spheres increased on the part of various social classes and layers. One group among these who tried hard to engage in autonomous action was the merchants. One example of this is an attempt by Bushehr merchants

¹⁵Ministry of National Economy to Ministry of the Interior, 8 Azar AH 1309/29 November 1930, 9890/11033, National Library and Archives of Iran.

¹⁶Ministry of Finance, “List of Cities Where There Are Chambers of Commerce,” 9 Shahrivar AH 1312/18 August 1933, 4618, National Library and Archives of Iran.

to supply wheat for the daily consumption of the Bushehr populace through the chamber of commerce. Beginning in February 1931, all commodities exported from or imported into Iran were required to have due government permits according to the act passed by the *Majlis* which effectively nationalized foreign trade. Prior to the arrival of the allied forces in Iran, the country saw a bad harvest in 1940 due to drought. After the occupation of the country, the need to feed foreign troops, the fact that Soviet forces tended to export Iranian wheat to their country, and the continuation of the drought, feeding the Iranian populace and supplying its main staple food—that is, bread—became a grave problem.

Bushehr, like all other cities in Iran, faced a bread shortage. Through the chamber of commerce and in an autonomous course of action without state officials' involvement, Bushehr merchants got into direct negotiations with the British consulate general in Bushehr, to import wheat from India, then a British colony, to provide the populace with bread. According to a letter from the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce to the British consulate general,

the volume of wheat supplied by the Finance Economy Office to the bakers is not enough at all; thus, according to negotiations in an extraordinary session of the chamber of commerce on the subject of feeding the populace [. . .] it has been decided that merchants with the help of the consulate general import wheat from India to the effect of 1,500 tons. Thus referring to negotiations with the consul and his endorsement, please provide the permit to Bushehr merchants to import the said wheat from Karachi.¹⁷

In the meantime, as war and occupation had caused a sharp increase in the prices of staples and the expenses of haulage, the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to the Bushehr Office of the Finance Department stating that

¹⁷Bushehr Chamber of Commerce to British consulate general at Bushehr, 16 Farvardin AH 1321/5 April 1942, 345, National Library and Archives of Iran.

as the populace finds it hard to provide themselves with staple bread due to a lack of wheat and are in great despair and face starvation, the chamber of commerce in an emergency session has decided to seek help from your office in order to make merchants able to import 1,500 tons of wheat [. . .] from India. To gain permission to that effect, there are already negotiations with the British consulate general in Bushehr underway and they too have agreed to the plan [. . .] please ask the Ministry of Finance to exempt the said wheat from customs tariffs.¹⁸

This shows that autonomous agency on the part of merchants allowed for the intervention of state bodies only where merchants asked for exemption from customs tariffs. Even so, state bodies, too, welcomed the move on the part of the chamber of commerce. The governor-general of Bushehr announced: “This move is totally according to my hearty blessings and hopefully the government will agree with the exemption of customs tariffs.” But he also signaled his unhappiness that merchants attempted to interact with the government on their own: “Now, for your information a copy of the decree number [. . .] issued by the Ministry of the Interior is enclosed [. . .] that from now on whatever demands and actions must be processed through the governor-general.”¹⁹

On the other hand, a year after the August 1953 coup, a totally different approach was taken by the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce when facing a commercial issue. After the coup, the state had once again maintained centralization in all spheres and had the final say in all matters. At this time, the new Shahpoor port was booming with business, and as a result, older ports, including Bushehr, were facing a downturn in business. Thus, to boost business in Bushehr port, the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce decided to encourage shipping lines to more often frequent the port. But this time, contrary to the twelve-year period of 1941 to 1953, the chamber of commerce had to contact state bodies and refrain from any independent action.

¹⁸Bushehr Chamber of Commerce to Bushehr Office of the Finance Department, 16 Farvardin AH 1321/5 April 1942, 35, National Library and Archives of Iran.

¹⁹Governor-general of Bushehr to Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, 18 Farvardin AH 1321/7 April 1942, 441, National Library and Archives of Iran.

Thus, the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce asked the governor-general to provide facilities for at least two ships to frequent Bushehr port on a monthly basis, to carry goods intended for exportation. In a letter to Bushehr's governor-general, the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce stated:

Considering the enthusiasm on the part of merchants engaged in export trade to send their goods through Bushehr port, and as exportation from Bushehr is totally in their best interests, and to enhance trade and provide jobs in the Bushehr area, we thereby ask to have an order from the governor-general to oblige the [. . .] shipping lines to send at least two ships on a monthly basis to Bushehr in order to carry exporting goods. At this moment, a substantial amount of goods is already in depot in Bushehr and a substantial amount is also ready to be sent to Bushehr.²⁰

Bushehr's governor-general, in turn, informed the officials in the provincial government who, in a subsequent letter to the Ministry of the Interior, stated: "The copy of the letter sent by the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce is enclosed, whereby they have asked to have two ships to monthly frequent Bushehr port in order to carry exporting goods. Please inform us of your decision."²¹

The Ministry of the Interior, in turn, referred the subject to yet another state body. A letter to the Ports and Shipping Department stated: "The copy of the letter by the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce concerning two ships frequenting Bushehr port in order to carry exporting goods has been received through the seventh province officials [. . .] Please inform the Ministry of the Interior of your decision."²²

The subject raised by the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce would have been resolved at once had it not been referred to multiple state

²⁰Bushehr Chamber of Commerce to governor-general of Bushehr, 17 Azar AH 1335/8 December 1956, 516, National Library and Archives of Iran.

²¹Provincial government of the seventh province to Ministry of the Interior, 10 Bahman AH 1335/30 January 1957, 22270, National Library and Archives of Iran.

²²Ministry of the Interior to the Ports and Shipping Department, 29 Bahman AH 1335/5 February 1957, 10371/89189, National Library and Archives of Iran.

bodies as a result of state centralization. This red tape was an excuse for state bodies to write and receive letters; and the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, in the meantime, refrained from any autonomous action.

Internal Conflict in the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce

In the aftermath of the August 1953 coup and downfall of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, the new government attempted to, once again, establish its unrivalled authority, and to centralize all executive affairs in all spheres of social life. First in a series of actions to achieve this was to annul all laws passed during Mossadeq's time in office. Furthermore, on 28 December 1954, a new law concerning the establishment of chambers of commerce was passed. Articles of this law were as follows:

1. Chambers of commerce to be founded by the Ministry of National Economy,
2. The right of the minister or his representative to preside over sessions of chambers of commerce and to participate in discussions and decision-making, and
3. Establishment of an association on the orders of the Ministry of National Economy and monitored by the governor-general and representatives of the Ministry of National Economy and Bank Melli [the national bank] in every city in order to pick out members of chamber of commerce three months prior to expiration of previous members' term of office.²³

After a few years, the Bureau of Chambers of Commerce was ceded from the Ministry of National Economy and put under the auspices of the Ministry of Trade.²⁴ The bureau's duties were as follows:

1. Providing bookkeeping for chambers of commerce to control their earnings and expenditures,
2. Keeping track of properties and office facilities of chambers of commerce,

²³Ministry of Trade, law pertaining to founding of chambers of commerce passed on 7 Dey AH 1333/28 December 1954, National Library and Archives of Iran.

²⁴Ministry of Trade, legal bill pertaining to founding of chambers of commerce, 16 Shahrivar AH 1338/8 September 1959, National Library and Archives of Iran.

3. Controlling statements concerning earnings and expenditures,
4. Announcing the time on which elections to chambers of commerce were held, and
5. Controlling chambers of commerce to report on their agendas in their sessions.²⁵

As the aforementioned demonstrates, laws ratified by the government after the coup increasingly made chambers of commerce act like offices subordinate to government ministries. At this very moment in the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, a conflict occurred between some merchants, on one hand, and the presidium of the chamber, on the other. Contrary to what normally would have been the case—that is, to let the aged and well-established members issue a verdict on the matter (*Kadkhoda maneshi*)—the course of the conflict took the shape of writing letters to the Ministry of National Economy, thereby getting a government body involved in the matter.

The conflict, at least on the surface, centered on the question of the continuation of the presidium's term of office. Even after their term of office expired, the presidium—in particular, its head, a person called Zareii—did not hold a new round of elections and continued to hold office. In a letter to the Ministry of National Economy, a merchant called Poostchi stated:

At the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, the term of office of the presidium has come to the end of its lawful term of office a year ago, and normally, and like all other chambers of commerce, has to abstain from all its activities, and its internal affairs should be governed under the auspices of the representative of the Ministry of National Economy [. . .] or under of the auspices of the Bushehr governor-general, or under the auspices of a committee including the governor-general, attorney general, and head of the Finance Department. But, in defiance of the law, the present presidium [. . .] governs the chamber [. . .] the disbanded presidium which

²⁵Ministry of National Economy, 23 Esfand AH 1333/14 March 1955, 39897, National Library and Archives of Iran.

is the legacy of the imposed third round of elections does not have the right to sign documents and letters of the chamber [. . .] what reason and what cause is there to have the affairs of the chamber in the hands of the disbanded presidium [. . .] to do, arbitrarily, whatever they wish.²⁶

Poostchi mentioned two issues: first, the fact that the presidium's term of office had already expired, and second, that this presidium was running affairs in a way to profit from it and causing loss for the other merchants. In another letter to the Ministry of National Economy, two more merchants who were also protesting the issue stated:

The Bushehr Chamber of Commerce term of office has ended one and half a years ago, and the unlawful election of the previous round has finished, the one that imposed a number of unrighteous people as the presidium, and even so, those particular people are still holding office [. . .] the head of the chamber, Zareii, who in fact is really the previous head, says that he has spent bribe money at the National Economy Department of the Seventh Province, and also at the Ministry of National Economy itself, and thus has influence and connections there who would not allow his dismissal, and even if it takes thousands of years to hold new elections, he would still occupy his position. And it really seems to be the case.²⁷

These two merchants repeated Poostchi's claims and also added that the present head of the chamber had gained office not through free consensus of the merchants themselves, but rather through personal influence in state bodies. If true, this shows the high extent of involvement on the part of state bodies in the affairs of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, which seemingly was a civil institution. Naturally, when the influence and involvement of state bodies in the affairs of chambers of commerce is so pervasive, civil institutions cannot be expected to take any autonomous course of action.

²⁶Abdolah Poostchi to Ministry of National Economy, 18 Aban AH 1333/9 November 1954, National Library and Archives of Iran.

²⁷Seyed Mostafa Asghari and Foroozan Najafi to Ministry of National Economy, 20 Aban AH 1333/11 November 1954, National Library and Archives of Iran.

In a letter to the Bureau of Chambers of Commerce, another merchant called Jamali spoke of “conflict and differences” among Bushehr merchants, and stated that the cause of the issue is that “Zareii, after nearly two years have passed since expiration of his term of office, and thus with no legality, still regards himself the head of the chamber.” Jamali added that Zareii says “he would not care about what orders may be issued in Tehran or Shiraz; his connections in those two cities would not let his dismissal occur.”²⁸

Yet another merchant, Faghih Beladi, wrote a letter repeating the previously mentioned claims and calling Zareii a “smuggler.” He continued: “Zareii, in order to influence the head of Bank Melli by his position in the chamber and to get loans and impose promissory notes issued by Gulf Textile factory, where he is the chief executive officer,” would not leave office. On top of that, Beladi claimed that Zareii, “in compliance with the governor-general, head of Bank Melli, and the mayor, has received 200,000 tomans as a loan for Gulf Textile factory and thereby has taken advantage of his position at the chamber.” This merchant, too, stated that Zareii had said that “he has connections in the Ministry of National Economy, and thus he will be the head of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce for life, whether it be lawful or otherwise.”²⁹

In response to the protests by Bushehr merchants, Abdolrahim Jafari, director of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, stated in a letter to the head of the Office of Internal Trade at the Ministry of National Economy:

As a result of conflicts among merchants that have divided them into a few opposing groups, the situation at the chamber is unclear [. . .] as feuds are culminating, the merchants are willing to get the chamber itself involved too [. . .] please specify that at this period

²⁸Haj Abbas Jamali to Bureau of Chambers of Commerce, Ministry of National Economy, 9 Aban AH 1333/31 October 1954, 20580, Prime minister’s office documents, National Library and Archives of Iran.

²⁹Faghih Beladi to Ministry of National Economy, 20 Azar AH 1333/11 December 1954, Prime minister’s office documents, National Library and Archives of Iran.

of recess of the chamber, who is the rightful person to take care of affairs at the chamber [. . .] in Bushehr, we are witnessing a strange and pitiful situation [. . .] and merchants are constantly writing conflicting letters and petitions to the Bushehr office, and even to offices in Shiraz.³⁰

The director, in his letter, tried to show that the conflicts were among the merchants themselves, without mentioning any reasons, to imply that the presidium of the chamber was not involved in the feuds. Jafari also asked for a formal order to be issued by the authorities at the Ministry of National Economy to install a “caretaker” for the chamber of commerce during “the period of recess,” which is in itself a sign of the extent to which chambers of commerce were obliged to follow and obey the ministry’s orders. Following that, the National Economy Office of the Seventh Province, too, in a letter to the Office of Internal Trade at the Ministry of National Economy, implied that the whole affair was nothing but a conspiracy:

Lately, there have been many petitions against Mr. Zareii, head of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, with different signatures, but almost the same handwriting; it was understood that these petitions have to be groundless and based on the malicious self-interest of one particular person. Thus, the petitions were sent to the Bushehr branch of the Office of Internal Trade, who were asked to investigate the affair and to identify the petitioners. At present, we have received a copy of a letter from the Bushehr police department which confirms the viewpoint of this office.³¹

This formal letter implied that the petitioners were unknown, but that every letter had been signed by one of the protesting merchants, and that the police department had succeeded in solving a grave crime by “identifying” the petitioners. Seemingly, the affair had now grown from

³⁰Bushehr Chamber of Commerce to Office of Internal Trade at the Ministry of National Economy, 23 Azar AH 1333/14 December 1954, National Library and Archives of Iran.

³¹National Economy Office of the Seventh Province to Office of Internal Trade at the Ministry of National Economy, 27 Dey AH 1333/17 January 1955, 2803, Prime minister’s office documents, National Library and Archives of Iran.

a case of pseudo-legal obeying by the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce toward state bodies, to ultra-legal actions taken by the Bushehr police department.

At last, in March 1955 new elections were held at the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce. The head of the Bushehr branch of Bank Melli was “elected” as the head of the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce. Zareii, too, was “elected” as the first assistant to the head of the chamber,³² which was obviously a formality and actually a way to let him continue to govern the chamber’s affairs.

The internal conflicts in the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce in the 1950s are a clear sign of the fact that the more state centralization increases, the less merchants find the opportunity or the will to take autonomous actions, the more group solidarity decreases, and the more merchants as a social grouping are swept aside to the margins of the arena where political and social agency is played out.

Conclusion

The endeavors of merchants as a social class in their conflicts with the state in Iran fluctuated between autonomous agency, on one hand, and dependence and apathy, on the other. The different courses of action adopted by Bushehr merchants are a clear sign that whenever the state’s centralizing efforts decreased, merchants embraced autonomous agency and demonstrated their class and group independence in many different ways. And whenever the state succeeded in the process of centralization, merchants and other social classes alike became dependent on executive bodies of the state and deprived of any possibility of autonomous agency. In the aftermath of the August 1953 coup, when the state, after a twelve-year interval, once again gained a high degree of centralization, at the Bushehr Chamber of Commerce a conflict occurred among merchants on the matter of holding new elections. This time, state centralization and the increasing dependence of chambers

³²Bushehr Chamber of Commerce, 23 Farvardin AH 1334/13 April 1955, Prime minister’s office documents, National Library and Archives of Iran.

of commerce on state bodies made protesting merchants pursue their petitions not in an internal manner, as they were used to, but through correspondence with state bodies. This particular affair and its ultimate conclusion was a clear sign of an end to any autonomous course of action on the part of Bushehr merchants and the chamber of commerce.