



# Political Immorality and Power Struggle in the Arsacid Empire

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** After the overthrow of the Achaemenid government by Alexander and the short-term rule of him and his successors, the Arsacid dynasty rose from the east of Iran. The Arsacid created a just and powerful government, but with all these powers, the Arsacid government, like others, suffered from political immorality, which gradually infiltrated its body and caused its overthrow. Over time, the internal conflicts over the power and the position of the king emptied this strong dynasty from the inside. The present study was formed with the aim of investigating the role of political immorality and power struggle in the decline of the Ashkan people.

**Material and Methods:** This review article was done with a descriptive analytical method and investigated the mentioned topic using the library method.

**Conclusion:** If political ethics is considered in the dimension of public policy, it can be said that according to the belief of many researchers, the Arsacid kings were the most just kings and they were less interested in building palaces and luxurious buildings and more focused on strengthening the economic body and distributing wealth in the society. But if political ethics is considered in the dimension of procedural ethics (or administrative ethics), it can be seen that as a result of trying to gain power under the influence of individual and group resources, a kind of quarrel and conflict was formed in the Arsacid dynasty which was effective in weakening the power of the Arsacid kings.

**Keywords:** *Political ethics, Arsacid, Power*

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## INTRODUCTION

After the overthrow of the Achaemenid government by Alexander and the short-lived rule of him and his successors, a dynasty from the east of Iran rose and took the flag of authority, which was named after its founder, as was the custom of other Iranian dynasties. The Arsacid were able to conquer and occupy Iranian lands one after another due to desert life and the use of Khedang. This Arsacid fighting style was one of the important reasons why the Arsacid dynasty

found the ability to resist enemies such as the Eastern Roman Empire. Although they were not very successful in conquering non-Iranian lands, they did not allow others to occupy Iranian cities either. Their 475-year rule over Iran was a sign of their strength and power in maintaining and ruling the country.

The Arsacid created a just and powerful government, but with all these powers, the Arsacid government, like others, was affected by the scourge of political immorality, which

gradually infiltrated its body and caused its overthrow. The internal conflicts over the power and the acquisition of the position of the king over time emptied this strong dynasty from the inside until there was no trace or traces of it left by Ardeshir Babakan [1]. According to historians, the nobles had a lot of power in appointing Arsacid kings and they did not hesitate to ask help from outsiders to remove and install kings. Throughout the history of the Arsacid kingdom, "almost at the time of each king's change, a civil war was created and many claimants called themselves kings, and treason, anarchy, and... were prevalent..."[2]. Although laws had been established to take over the power and reach the position of king, but the war and conflict over the succession and the crown prince continued. In the meantime, the role of influential groups such as nobles and nobles, Iran's neighbors and even court women and priests were the most colorful of all, of course, all of them thought more about their own benefit than the interest of the country. The glory and power of the imperial throne had turned the hearts to stone and blinded the eyes to such an extent that fratricide and patricide are abundantly seen among kings and Arsacid nobles [3]. According to what was said, the present study was formed with the aim of investigating the role of political immorality and power struggle in the decline of Ashkan people.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

In terms of its purpose, this article is in the category of basic studies, and in terms of its nature and working method, it is considered as historical research. The collection of information was done in the form of a library, and since the main axis was based on ancient Iran, its sources were the original and research books related to this period. After taking the plug based on the initial plan, its writing stage was done in a descriptive-analytical way. At this stage, the

historical incident, which is the intra-family conflicts of the Arsacid, was first described, and during that, the analysis and autopsy of the issue was also carried out.

## DISCUSSION

### The historical background of the Arsacids dynasty

Before entering the main discussion, we need a topic plan under the title of the historical background of the Arsacid dynasty. The Arsacid was Aryan clans that were related to the "Parni" from the point of view of the tribal organization. According to the historical texts, the Parni were also a subgroup of the "Dahe" people and on a larger scale the Scythians who lived in the plains and steppes of Central Asia, probably the banks of the Okhus River [4, 5]. Arsaces (247-217 B.C.), in about 250 B.C., reached Estane, which is probably the Atrak region, and Arsaces was elected king a little later in 247 B.C. in Asak, a city in Estane. The Seleucids, who were engaged in wars in the west of their possessions, i.e. Syria, could not create a serious obstacle for the development of Arsaces and his allies [4, 6]. Arsacid slowly and wisely established the foundations of their kingdom. Arsacid warriors and swift horsemen were ready to rule and return the throne to the Iranians. The Seleucids should prepare themselves to leave the land of Iran and return to their homeland. The Seleucids' efforts to maintain their possessions ended with the death of Antiochus VII (129-139 BC) in 129 BC in Media. From now on, the Seleucids could never disturb the Arsacid. With the reign of Mehrdad II (124-88 BC) and the recapture of Mesopotamia and conquests in the east and exerting influence in Armenia, Arsacid Dynasty reached the peak of its power and prosperity [4, 5, 7]. In the foreign arena and in the military confrontations between the two superpowers of the time, the Romans tasted defeat many times. Despite this, the Romans penetrated deep into the Arsacid

territory several times. Finally, in 224 AD, Ardeshir Sasanian delivered the last major blow to the body of the Ashkan kingdom, and the Sasanian kingdom was going to become the Roman Empire [4-7].

Parθava satrapy is mentioned in the famous Biston rock inscription, that is, for the period before Darius I. This satrapy should include most of Khorasan province of Iran and Hyrcania. The name parθava is an ancient Persian word. However, it is worth noting that the inhabitants of the Achaemenid satrapy are parθava. This means that only Parthians are represented in Achaemenid rock paintings in Persepolis. Therefore, the name of parθava was a geographical name at the beginning and later, when the invading Persians expanded their rule over other regions of Iran, it was changed to the name of the tribe in the form of Parth [4]. The knowledge of the origin of the Parthians comes from Justin, who says that they were expelled from the land of the Scythians, and Strabo believes that Arshak was one of the Scythians who was related to the Aparani, a part of the Dahe deserters who lived on the banks of the Akhus (southern Jihon). He invaded Parthian land and took it [8]. According to Strabo, the Dahes were a union of three tribes, Pisor, Xanthiui and Parni, who lived in a vast land along the northern border of Iran to the Caspian Sea. According to this author, this neighborhood was a permanent danger for the border states of Iran.

The more important argument is that one of these three tribes was the Dahe, that is, the Parnis, who later conquered Iran and formed the Parthian government [6]. Evaluation of the ruling situation in the middle of Dahes, Derbis, Massagets and Scythians, which were of course the most famous ancient tribes. Strabo has relatively more information about the Dahes living on this border, which indicates that their lifestyle is a sharp contrast between the life of the sedentary population of Iran and the life of the

nomadic desert dwellers. Dahes often organized bandit patrols in the borderlands and looted people who apparently did not have a strong defense.

Greek historians believe that after Alexander's death, Iran fell into the hands of one of his respected generals named Seleucus, he also gained the land of Levant. After him, Atiokhos II (Suter) sat in his place [9]. It was during his reign that the northeastern part of Iran was separated from his country, while the Seleucids were busy elsewhere, the ruler of Bactria named Diodotus declared his kingdom there. From the very beginning, the regions of Sogd and Marw were annexed to the new country, but other regions of the east continued to obey the Seleucid sultans for a long time. Therefore, the establishment of a powerful, strict and orderly government that was favored by the Greek population could not be desirable for the sake of the neighboring nomadic tribes and nomads [2], the Parthians who were dissatisfied with the Seleucids' domination and their rule [10]. With the help of the noble tribes led by the Arsaces family, they refused to obey the Seleucids and became independent.

He tried to bring them under his rule, but the desert hunters, escaping from danger, captured Parthian land in the neighborhood of Balkh and killed its satrap. After that, under the command of Arsaces, they occupied the entire region that is today the north-eastern border of Russia. Two years later, Arsaces was killed in the war, but the Parthians, who were always at war, under the command of Tirdad, took the entire area, and it was in the heights of this area that Tirdad built his first throne. Seleucus II tried to limit the scope of the movement and, if possible, expel the invaders. As the Seleucid army approached, the Parthian commander retreated to the steppes of his hometown in the usual manner of the Scythians, and at the same time, the dangerous riots in Antioch forced the Seleucid king to leave the military operations in the east unfinished and

leave to Syria. The Parthians took advantage of this opportunity and Tirdad took possession of the conquered areas of Pishni once again and added Hyrkani region to his possessions and thus the central core of the Parthian kingdom was formed.

Undoubtedly, what enabled the Parthians to build a new state from the remnants of the Achaemenid heritage in the eastern regions of Iran was the military power and defensive alliance of these clans. But their definite success in the development of this government was achieved when the support of the people of Parthava, who were their relatives in the city, was supported by their power. Because of the important role that this region played in the expansion and expansion of the power of the Arsaces family, the government of this dynasty was also called the Parthian government.

### **The Parthian king is the most important element of the power structure in the Parthian dynasty**

During the Parthian era, the king was at the top of the pyramid of society and at the same time "brother of the sun and the moon", which means he had a divine and heavenly nature. According to the constitution, he could appoint, dismiss, condemn or forgive. But in practice, from now on, the aforementioned powers depended on the character and character of the king himself and his influence on the people and feudal lords, which was not possible without any work. Even though the emperor is a superpower, he should have taken into account the advice and recommendations of the white elders and elders gathered in the center of the council responsible for discussing the laws. The most important role of the Parthian kings was to constantly rotate among the great landowners, the holders of high government positions that could not be left aside. Parthian emperors were distinguished as warriors, and there were few Parthian emperors

who did not personally go to the battlefield. The Parthian emperor was respected by the people [11]. A historian writes [12] "The Parthians considered the person of the Parthian king to be sacred, and after his death, they built and worshiped his body". The authority of the emperor was not limited by law and if he removed the obstacles, he would rule with tyranny. The concept of the kingdom depended on several traditions interacting with each other in Iran. First, the Avestan tradition, then the ancient Achaemenid imperial ideology, the second was the Greek reception of the king that came up during the time of the Seleucids, the fourth was the influence of the Parthians who inherited the previous two traditions, and the fifth was the special tradition of Pars, the birthplace of the Sassanids [13]. Four documents show that Parthian kings considered themselves gods. The image of Artabanus IV of Parthia in Khwask, a beardless king who may be Feri Yapet calls himself Theos (God) on a coin; Orduan II is called Theopator (Father of God), contrary to the common custom, the Greeks gave Farhad IV the title of "Mighty God". It seems that the history of this concept and application finally reaches Alexander and through him to his successors [14]. The fact that the king calls himself the Lord shows that his subjects should not consider him as an ordinary king, but should recognize him with divine attributes. However, the reference to Yazidi descent suggests a difference between kings and gods such as Ahura Mazda or Anahita, who conferred the kingship on the Sasanians. In Greek traditions, the word Theos was used for both the king and the gods. But in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) and Parthian narratives, this is not the case, but here the Shah is given the title Bagh (Bay) and Ahura Mazda is given the title Yazad, which goes back to the Avesta and its plural is Yazdan. For Sassanid Iranians, there were two gods: first, the great king and his fathers, whether alive or dead, as god-like human beings and as a

result material being, secondly, gods in the literal sense of the word, meaning spiritual beings [15].

### **Political ethics in the Parthian era**

Political ethics (sometimes called political ethics or public ethics) is the practice of moral judgment about political action and the study of that action. Political ethics is divided into two branches, each with distinct problems and with different, though overlapping, literature. One branch, process ethics (or administrative ethics), focuses on public officials and the methods they use. Another branch, political ethics (or ethics and public policy) focuses on judgments about policies and laws. Both use moral and political philosophy, democratic theory and political science [16]. But political ethics alone constitutes an independent subject. Most of the authors in this field do not try to apply fundamental moral theories, but rather work with middle-level concepts and principles that more accurately reflect the considerations that political agents can take into account in decisions and policies.

#### **A. Political ethics in the dimension of public policy during the Parthian Period**

Here, the authors of this article paid attention to public policy in terms of justice and distribution of wealth among people. According to the available documents, Parthian kings were among the most just kings of Iran. The Parthian kings were less interested in building palaces and luxurious buildings and more focused on strengthening the economic body of the society and distributing the wealth at the level of the society [17]. The proof of this statement is the discovery of very small coins from this period, which shows that at that time people could buy and sell and meet their vital needs with a very small amount. According to the documents, the inflation rate was zero due to the character of Parthian kings' justice expansion and their attention to the livelihood and economic situation of the people. For example, in a

document left from the Parthian era, which is related to a vineyard, the transactions and transfers of this vineyard during 100 years have been recorded. It is interesting to know that the price of this garden has always been constant in these hundred years, which goes back to the Parthian period, and this means that the inflation rate in these hundred years has been zero. There are also documents that show the good living conditions of the people during the Parthian era. For example, salt men were discovered in Zanjan today. The archaeologists' initial impression of the quality of the clothes, boots and gold ornaments (earrings) was that this salt man was probably one of the princes of Iran. But with further research and the discovery of other salt men, it became clear that the first salt man lived in the Parthian period and was an ordinary person from the lower levels of society, and this shows that people enjoyed good wealth and prosperity during the Parthian period [18].

#### **B. Political ethics in the aspect of procedural ethics during the Parthian period**

Here, the authors of this article have paid attention to process ethics in terms of the behavior of Parthian officials and nobles in the field of seeking power and fighting over power.

##### **- *Conflict between officials and nobles over economic interests***

Since the Parthian aristocracy was originally a tribal aristocracy based on tribal privileges, it is natural that during the formation of the Parthian government, it demanded concessions from the Parthian kings for its role. In fact, here the issue is about receiving the land rent after the expansion of the conquests, which was given to them in exchange for the support of tribal nobles. According to the researchers, this factor was the main factor in gaining the power of the Parthian aristocracy [17, 19, 20]. In the first 150 years of the Parthian rule, this issue can be seen as a unifying factor of the aristocracy and the central government, that is, on the one hand, the king

was unable to directly administer the regions of his territory, so he could administer them through the aristocracy [21]. And on the other hand, this issue led to the growth of several powerful tribes, whose influence increased in the conquered lands that they received as a reward.

According to this issue, the importance of the obtained properties and assets for the Parthian aristocracy was very high, which became the most important factor in shaping the power and political, administrative and financial roles of the Parthian military [22]. The very important thing is that this aristocracy, with its tribal origin, which had now changed its nature to a more powerful family, was able to interfere in the internal affairs of the empire, especially when its material interests or properties were in danger or threatened by the central government. The beginning of this conflict was with the cessation and end of conquests during Mehrdad II. According to Józef Wolski, the end of Mehrdad II's rule is the beginning of conflicts between aristocratic families and Parthian kings over their interests and privileges [6]. In this context, a historian emphasizes the military power and having a private army of nobles [6]. In fact, the Parthian army, which was a completely feudal army, was the basis of land ownership for the Parthian nobles on the one hand, and formed their military force on the other hand. This army was subordinated to its feudal commander more than the king; this issue itself made the use of this army by the nobles sometimes not compatible with the interests of the government [21]. On the other hand, when this army loses its effectiveness and relies more on land ownership, it would be very difficult and a source of conflict with the central government to use this army if it does not bring benefits to them. In this context, Zarrin Kob has an interesting description of the nature of the Parthian government. He writes: "The Parthian government looks more like a military camp as if it could not use all its resources without

war" [11]. This issue is especially important in the foreign policy of the Parthians and their battles with Rome, which arose from the middle centuries of their rule. In these battles, Parthians appear as defenders, not attackers. The reason for this is that the fight against Rome was not only beneficial for the aristocracy, but it also endangered their interests and assets. Therefore, the Parthian aristocracy, which always hoped to gain wealth and power after the great conquests of the country [23]. Because he did not know how to fight with Rome in this direction, he wanted to oppose the king's request to fight with Rome. On the other hand, if we consider the other part of the Parthian aristocracy, i.e. the independent and semi-independent governments in their territory, especially in Mesopotamia, this aristocracy also showed a tendency to not support the Parthian king in the event of a conflict with Rome. Because, according to Verstandig, they obtained great benefits from trade with the West, their estates were on the front lines of the first Roman attacks [24]. Therefore, with the political and administrative independence that the Parthian kings gave to their local governments (and aristocracy), they were allowed to develop their individual politics in the international situation and exploit the territorial resources and commercial opportunities of their lands [25]. This issue is especially important at the end of the Parthian period, because the local aristocracy and local rulers sometimes even supported the Romans against the Parthians in order to protect their interests and easily joined them without any resistance during the Roman campaigns. This issue itself intensified the differences between the aristocracy and the Parthian government.

Another important issue is that when there is no more news of conquests and the Parthian army loses its effectiveness and becomes a feudal aristocracy, there will definitely be conflicts among these feudal lords themselves in order to expand their territories and properties. And each

of them conflicted with other properties in order to increase their properties, and therefore this factor could become a factor in shaping internal disputes in the Parthian government. This issue is reflected in the explanation of the structure of the Parthian kingdoms in Islamic sources, and Tabari writes about the reason for the Parthian kingdoms: And the kings of Al-Tawaif were named because each of them had a small area of land, there were a few palaces and houses, and there was a moat around it, and the enemy was close to him, and like him, he had a little land, and one of them would attack the other like lightning and return [26]. The author of Sunni Al-Muluk book also mentions this issue and points out that after the division of the empire and Iran becoming the Al-Tawaif kings, the cities fell into the hands of the Al-Tawaif kings and they began to fight and fight with each other and each wanted to conquer the other [27]. Edward Dabrova has investigated this case from another angle and sees the existence of internal conflicts among the nobles in the Parthian period as the cooperation between their large groups with the Romans from the time of Farhad III onwards [21]. This issue has caused people like Wiesehöfer to consider the party aristocracy as a divided and scattered aristocracy [28]. But it must be emphasized that this aristocracy had a continuous and extensive control over the affairs of the Parthian empire, even if it was divided and weak, the same issue was reflected in the number of their choices for the succession of kings in the Mahestan assembly.

- ***The quarrel of nobles over the succession of the king***

The issue of the succession of Parthian kings was a very important issue that became a factor for betrayal, Chinese conspiracy, and quarrels among Parthian nobles. First, the issue of succession was ambiguous in the Parthian period. Secondly, due to the great influence of the Mahestan noble assembly in this matter, the importance of the role of the nobles in it was very high. Therefore, it

can be said that the role of the kings in the matter of succession was never absolute and the Parthian kings could choose their successor from among the members of the royal family only when they had power, but their choice had to be approved in the Mahestan Assembly [29]. Therefore, it is possible to understand the selective nature of succession in the Parthian period [29].

During the Parthian period, the exclusive right to the throne was only reserved for the entire royal family [30-32]. This issue, that is, the entire Parthian royal family, was a vague and controversial issue throughout the history of this dynasty. A further explanation is that no specific branch of the Parthian family is considered in this principle, and according to historians, any male from the Parthian dynasty of any branch was worthy of kingship. This issue is very important when it is examined from the perspective of the issue of polygamy in the Parthian period.

It is stated in history that Parthians had many wives [33, 34]. In this context, the interesting point that can be found from these documents is that even several of these king's wives could have the position of the first queen [34]. However, the same issue of polygamy caused the creation of many princes and children, and therefore many claimants for succession

In the end, dynastic conflicts and cruel conflicts between multiple heirs not only led to the destruction of the king's rival sons, but also led to the destruction of the rulers themselves [21]. Therefore, this issue was a very good opportunity for the profit-seeking Parthian aristocracy to use several options for the matter of succession and to support them against the king and his successor. In response to this situation, the Parthian kings took a very immoral and barbaric action, namely killing their own family [30]. Another notable issue in the issue of polygamy of Parthian kings, which raised the ground for the involvement of the nobility, was the political marriages of kings with the rulers of local

kingdoms, which, according to historians, are often done as a political tool to unite with these rulers [34]. This could increase the position of these rulers [21]. Undoubtedly, its important consequence was providing the ground for more involvement in the matter of succession. Therefore, this factor could increase the power of the Parthian aristocracy and cause conflicts between them and the Parthian kings.

In general, it can be said that the issue of succession was one of the most important issues for the involvement of the Parthian nobles in the political situation of this period and their role. In fact, what helped the aristocracy in this field, in addition to the problems and ambiguities in the matter of succession that we mentioned, according to researchers, was the increasing power of the aristocracy as a result of conquests [21]. This led to the domination of the aristocracy over the lands and their subjects. This dominance was manifested in the private army of the nobles, who could use these citizens and their private army against the Parthian kings in the event of a dispute in the succession issue and support their desired people who would protect their interests the most. In fact, according to Andre Verstand, one of the reasons for the nobles' support of different people in order to reach power was that those who had the real power demanded more privileges from each person in exchange for their support, all of which were detrimental to the power of the monarchy [24]. Therefore, according to these materials, the issue of succession can be considered as one of the controversial issues between kings and nobles on the one hand and among the nobles themselves on the other hand. This factor, together with the ownership and economic power of the nobles, was the core of the decline of the Parthians and the shaper of destructive conflicts throughout the history of the Parthians. The increasing power of the Parthian aristocracy, which on the other hand resulted in the decrease of the power of the kings

and the central government, was derived from the roles and privileges of the aristocracy on the one hand, and the performance of the kings against them on the other hand. This factor can be considered as the starting point of the decline of the Parthians. This means that the conflicts became the internal factor and the core of the weak performance of the Parthians, first in internal affairs and then in foreign policy, especially against the Romans. Of course, it should be stated that the conflict between the aristocracy and the central government in the sense of the conflict between the centrifugal forces and the centralism of governments can be investigated in any period of history. But in the Parthian period, especially because of the feudal nature and the structure of the tribal kings, their power and government, this feature is more visible than any other period. When the basis of power in a government is based on feudalism and decentralized government, the effort to centralize and limit feudal privileges by the central government undoubtedly makes conflict and conflict among the ruling class inevitable. Now, if on one side of this process there is an aristocracy with a wide level of privileges and powers, who is not satisfied in any way to give up their privileges and powers in front of the central government, this issue becomes a very dangerous factor in weakening that government. This issue was the main feature of the Parthian rule for about five centuries.

## CONCLUSION

If political ethics is considered in the dimension of public policy, it can be said that according to the belief of many researchers, the Parthian kings were the most just kings and they were less interested in building palaces and luxurious buildings and more focused on strengthening the economic body and distributing wealth in the society. But if political ethics is considered in the dimension of procedural ethics (or



administrative ethics), it can be seen that as a result of trying to gain power under the influence of individual and group resources, a kind of quarrel and conflict was formed in the Parthian family which was effective in weakening the power of the Parthian kings. The power in the political structure of the Parthian dynasty was based on the person of the king. The Mahestan Assembly and nobles were important and influential elements in the Shah's election and his decisions. The desire for power and monopolization of the kings, betrayal, conflict and strife for power within the Parthian family were so great that the nobles and nobles rebelled against the king. Sometimes external factors also fueled the spread of disputes and as a result rebellion against the king. Inside the Roman Empire, as a rival and enemy of the Parthians, some people infiltrated the Parthian court and encouraged the nobles and nobles to betray each other and the king.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues (such as plagiarism, conscious satisfaction, misleading, making and or forging data, publishing or sending to two places, redundancy and etc.) have been fully considered by the writers.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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