Before I start discussing the office of kalāntar I’d like to point out a few facts which usually are neglected in discussions about Qājār Persia. Qājār Persia was a pre-industrial society with a rather weak central government. The various cities enjoyed self-government to a certain extent as did many corporate groups, such as tribes, guilds and village communities. The main function of the Persian bureaucracy was the levying of taxes. As long as the corporate groups paid their taxes and did not try to tilt the balance of power they were allowed to administrate their own internal affairs without too much governmental interference. This policy did not stem from some democratic notion as is clear from the repressive nature of the Persian police force 1).

The power elite did not have enough manpower to extend their sphere of influence to all layers of society; and rivalry between factions among the elite undermined their original solidarity. Furthermore the paucity of communications greatly hampered the effectiveness of the central government. All this forced the central government to rely in the outlying provinces on the local elite. This co-operation between the central government and the local influential families enhanced the position of both. The central government was thus assured of local powerful support which gave a boost to its (not in-) frequently unstable rule. One such local backer was the kalāntar whose task it was to keep the population happy, so that they would pray for the well-being of the Shah 2) and pay their taxes in time.

The appearance of the office of kalântar dates back to post-Ilkhan times. In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the task of the kalântar "would seem in some measure to have been a link between the civil population and the government and to have been concerned with whatever closely affected the interests of the people, notably the taxation and public order" 1).

In the 19th century the kalântar was the most important urban official. In some cities such as Shîrâz, Mashad and Tabriz, this position was occupied by the begler begi 2). It appears that begler begi was a title of (amongst others) kalântars of big cities, and not a function. In the Fârsnâma we find several times that someone is invested with the office (mansâb) of kalântar with the title (laqâb) of begler begi 3). Credence to this supposition is lent by the fact that several other officials in Qâjâr Persia, who did not have the function of kalântar were honoured with the title of begler begi 4). In Shîrâz this official was also designated with the title kalântar-i (iyâlat-i) Fârs and seems to have been the only begler begi to have been also known as kalântar 5). Both begler begi and kalântar received their appointment from the Shah as was the case in former centuries 6).

They were mostly chosen from local families for reasons which I have dwelled upon above. Exceptions occurred however, for example

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1) Ibid., p. 206.
3) Fasâ’î, vol 2, pp 49-51.
4) Comp. e.g. Yate, p. 166; Aḥmâd ‘Alî Khân Vaziri; Jughrâfîyā-yi Kermān. Ed. I Pârîzî, Tehrân 1967, p. 73; J. Greenfield, Die Verfassung des Persischen Staates, Berlin 1904, p. 254; see also below p. 266, note 8.
5) A. Mustawfî, Shahr-i Zindijâni-yi Man, 3 vols, Tehrân 1947, vol. 1, p. 37 note 1. The office was also known as kalântar-i-yi Shîrâz, Fasâ’î, vol. 2, pp. 48, 98.
6) Greenfield, p. 254; Wilson, Persian Life and Customs, London 1896, p. 66.