

Revisiting Iran's 1953 coup d'état after 73 years

Confluence of domestic crisis, rivalry of great powers



By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Despite all of that, Iranians will not forget the great service that Mosaddegh did for their country prior to the coup in standing up to exactly the same great powers. However, it is worth revisiting the event to go over the exploited weaknesses of a nationalistic movement that was monumental and a source of admiration for the region and later, the Non-Aligned Movement. The coup d'état of August 19 was not limited merely to the fall of Mosaddegh's cabinet; rather, its consequences cast a shadow for years upon the political structure, foreign relations, and social transformations of Iran. Nevertheless, concerning which factors precipitated the coup, the extent of the contribution of domestic dissensions, the performance of Mosaddegh's cabinet, the precise objectives with which the United States and Britain entered this affair, and the role of forces such as the court, the military, and the Tudeh Party, divergent perspectives continue to exist. In the forthcoming exclusive interview of Iran Daily with Shadab Asgari, a researcher, author, and scholar of the history of the revolution, we commence with this question: whether the coup d'état of August 19 was exclusively the result of foreign interference or whether a constellation of domestic and foreign factors contributed to its formation and success; a query whose response could facilitate a more precise comprehension of one of the most destiny-shaping occurrences in the contemporary history of Iran.

Shadab Asgari



Seventy-three years subsequent to the coup d'état of August 19, 1953, this event persists as one of the most paramount and contentious junctures in the contemporary history of Iran. On that day, the cabinet of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, the then-prime minister of Iran who, during the movement for the nationalization of the petroleum industry, had withstood British influence and petroleum interests, collapsed following a series of political developments and orchestrated domestic and foreign operations, and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi once again consolidated his position.

The role of the intelligence organizations of the United States and Britain in this event, in conjunction with domestic political dissensions and fractures, constitutes one of the most significant axes of discussion concerning this occurrence.

IRAN DAILY: Given that much has been said and written concerning the coup d'état of August 19, in your estimation, what were the most significant predisposing factors of this coup? Should the nationalization of Iran's petroleum industry and the threatening of British petroleum interests, in addition to American apprehension regarding the proliferation of Communism — even though Mosaddegh's movement was not communist — be regarded as the principal factors, or did other issues also exist?

ASGARI: These factors are certainly significant, but from my perspective, all of them, in actuality, revert to a series of more profound factors. One of the most crucial matters is Dr. Mosaddegh's performance and some of his political errors, which laid the groundwork for the success of the coup. In my conviction, one of Dr. Mosaddegh's initial errors was his disregard for Iran's historical experience and the warnings that were conveyed to him by certain political forces. In Iran's contemporary history, numerous instances existed that demonstrated foreign powers, in their relations with Iran, act exclusively on the basis of their own interests. For example, during the Second World War, Iran, despite having declared neutrality, was subjected to occupation by British and Soviet forces. At that juncture as well, the Iranian cabinet endeavored to alleviate the concerns of the foreign parties, but ultimately, the interests of the great powers proved determinative. From this perspective, one of the essential lessons of history is that, in international relations, one ought not to rely solely upon the promise or support of a foreign power.

You alluded to Dr. Mosaddegh's errors. In your view, what were his most significant errors? I regard several instances as significant. First, disregard for certain political warnings and recommendations. Second, decisions that were adopted concerning the structure of power and the Parliament. Third, the method of his confrontation with the Shah and, finally, excessive trust in the United States. Concerning the Parliament, one of the significant issues was Dr. Mo-

saddegh's decision to dissolve the Parliament. His critics maintained that this action could eliminate certain of the legal instruments for controlling the cabinet and, simultaneously, augment the Shah's authority in the domain of appointing and dismissing the prime minister. This decision was adopted under circumstances in which the rift between the nationalist and religious forces was also widening, and this rift, in practice, weakened the coalition that had been formed during the movement for the nationalization of the petroleum industry.

In this context, to what extent was the dissension between Dr. Mosaddegh and Ayatollah Kashani influential in weakening Mosaddegh's cabinet?

In my opinion, it was extremely influential. At a certain juncture, the nationalist and religious forces had been situated alongside one another, and this very unity constituted one of the significant factors in the power of the national movement. Gradually, however, this unity weakened, and the distance between these two movements increased. When such a fracture emerged, it was natural that foreign forces could also exploit it. Had this political and social coalition been preserved, the conditions for the cabinet's opponents would have been considerably more difficult.

How do you evaluate the military's role in executing the coup?

The military was the determinative factor. Mosaddegh possessed a popular base of support, but after distancing himself from Ayatollah Kashani, he lost a portion of that base. The Shah, at that juncture, also did not possess a notable popular base. Consequently, under circumstances in which both sides confronted limitations from a social standpoint, it was the organized power of the military that could determine the outcome.

In my conviction, one of Mosaddegh's significant errors was that he did not demonstrate the requisite sensitivity toward the military's command structure and the individuals who occupied critical positions. At that juncture, individuals such as Brigadier General Ataollah Kiani and Asadollah



Sanii were present at important military echelons, and I contend that the presence of untrusted individuals in sensitive positions could have proven perilous for the cabinet. The issue is that, in critical conditions, the cabinet ought to exhibit greater sensitivity regarding the degree of loyalty and performance of those situated at the highest military and security levels.

Subsequent to the failure of the coup attempt of August 16 and the Shah's flight, why was Mosaddegh's cabinet unable to exploit this opportunity?

In my view, this constitutes one of the most debatable points in the affair. Following the failure of the initial attempt, the Shah departed the country. Under such circumstances, the cabinet could have controlled the situation by adopting more decisive decisions. Had the Shah been arrested at that juncture, or had the possibility of his continued political activity and communication been eliminated, naturally, the conditions could have been entirely

different. Such an occurrence, however, did not transpire. Mosaddegh, in his confrontation with the Shah and the forces affiliated with him, entertained numerous considerations, and this very matter afforded the opposition forces the opportunity to reorganize themselves.

Alongside the United States and Britain, the Tudeh Party and the apprehension concerning the proliferation of its brand of Communism also constitute among the reasons stated concerning the coup. To what extent do you regard this factor as significant?

The Tudeh Party was assuredly one of the significant factors in the political atmosphere of that period, but I contend that one ought not to exaggerate its role in the manner that is sometimes stated in official Western narratives. Fear concerning Communism existed, but from my perspective, the principal issue was not merely confrontation with the Soviet Union. The great powers sought to preserve their desired order in the



A notable pro-Shah strongman and thug called Shaban Jafari (C), commonly known as Shaban the Brainless ("Shaban Bimokh"), leads his men and other bribed street thugs during the coup of August 19, 1953.
● psri.ir



Subsequent to the Second World War, the United States played a role in political transformations and coups in numerous Latin American countries and other regions of the world. From this perspective, Iran was not an exception. The issue for the great powers was that an independent political model ought not to emerge in a country such as Iran; a model that could also serve as an inspiration for other countries.

region. In the years subsequent to the Second World War, the United States gradually supplanted Britain's position in numerous regions of the world. Consequently, Iran likewise became an arena in which the United States desired to consolidate its presence and influence.

Therefore, you contend that fear concerning the proliferation of Communism alone cannot supply a complete explanation for the coup d'état of August 19?

Precisely. If the issue were merely confrontation with Communism, one would have to explain why certain other political forces were not similarly confronted at that same juncture, or why, subsequent to the coup, the Tudeh Party's military network was extensively suppressed. From my perspective, three objectives ought to be considered: preventing the formation of an independent political model in Iran, preserving petroleum and economic interests, and, furthermore, consolidating Iran's strategic position and that of the Persian Gulf region. Iran possessed immense geographical significance, and its adjacency to the Soviet Union and its proximity to the Persian Gulf doubled the country's importance for the great powers.

How was the role of the United States and Britain in the coup divided? Did any competition exist between them?

Competition, in that direct sense, did not exist; rather, it appears that their interests ultimately converged. Britain possessed a long history of influence in Iran, but subsequent to the Second World War, the United States gradually acquired a more dominant position. August 19 can be regarded as a significant juncture in the consolidation of America's more direct presence in Iran's political and security structure. Thereafter, Iran's security and intelligence institutions also gradually developed with the assistance and training of foreign advisors.

Can it be asserted that the coup d'état of August 19 was exclusively an action against Mosaddegh's cabinet, or was it considered part of a broader American strategy in the world?

The Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (front-L) is being sentenced to prison in December 1953 after a CIA-backed coup cemented the rule of the shah.
● AP