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Mohammad Mossadegh, Prime Minister of Iran, 1951 – 1953: a biography

Mossadegh was convicted of treason. He was subjected to solitary confinement for three years, and then to house arrest for the rest of his life in his ancestral village of Ahmad-Abad. On March 5, 1967, Mohammad Mossadegh died at the age of 85, one year and ten months after the death of his beloved wife of 64.



Oh, I know your enemy well, the same one we have around here... wrote Nicolás Guillén. How to forget those verses... Those who kill you swear that you are happy... Is it true? Elsewhere, under other skies, empires committed the same crimes. Like in Iran. When the priced press today exposes what it does not like about that country, it forgets to mention the genesis: a coup d'état, one more, against Mohammed Mossadegh, overthrown by the CIA and the British MI6 on August 19, 1953, twenty years before September 11. Here's that story.-LC

Mohammed Mossadegh was born on 16 June 1882 in Tehran. His father, Mirza Hedayat Ashtiani, was Iran's finance minister and his mother, Najm al-Saltaneh, was closely linked to the ruling Kadjar dynasty (1789-1925). When he was 10 years old, his father died, leaving him and his only younger sister in the care of their mother.



Mohammed Mossadegh

In recognition of his late father's services to the crown, King Nasir al-Din Shah bestowed upon him the title of "Mossadegh al-Saltaneh". Years later, when a system of national identity cards was introduced in Iran, he chose the surname Mossadegh, which means "true and authentic."

Mossadegh's career began at the exceptionally young age of 15, when he was named, also in honor of his father, Mostofi (chief of finance) of Khorasan province. In addition to being interested in modern science, he practiced various sports and learned to play the tar, a traditional Persian stringed instrument.

At the age of 19 he married Zia al-Saltaneh, a Kadjar princess, whom he considered "the person I loved most after my mother". The couple had three daughters - Zia Ashraf, Mansoureh and Khadijeh - and two sons, Ahmad and Gholam-Hosseini.

Mossadegh was only 21 years old when the people of Isfahan elected him to the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) to represent them. However, not being of legal age, he withdrew his name from the list of candidates. During the constitutionalist movement of 1905-1911, Mossadegh actively participated in the events that led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in place of arbitrary monarchical rule.

Mossadegh studied political science in Tehran and, in 1909, continued his studies in Paris. During his stay in the French capital he began to experience extreme weakness and fatigue, and was forced to abandon his studies and return to Iran. Throughout his life he suffered from this persistent problem, better known today as "chronic fatigue syndrome". He later returned to Europe and studied law at the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland). In June 1913, he became the first Iranian to earn a doctorate in law and returned to Iran just one day before the outbreak of World War I.



Mossadegh, in 1912

Shortly after his return to Iran, Mossadegh was maliciously accused by a political rival. This baseless accusation displeased him so much that he fell ill with a fever. His mother,

known for founding Tehran's Najmieh charity hospital, realized he was sad and told him she would have preferred him to study medicine instead of law.

Anyone who studies law and engages in politics should be prepared to suffer all kinds of slander and insults, he said, but "a person's worth in society depends on what he endures for the good of the people."

In his memoirs, Mossadegh wrote that these words of wisdom had prepared him for the life he had chosen and that, thereafter, the more he faced hardship and insults, the more willing he was to serve the country.

Mossadegh accepted a government post as undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, where he tried to fight corruption and had several people convicted. In 1919, he chose to go into exile in Switzerland to protest against an agreement between the government and Britain that he found very worrying.

The main provision of the deal was that British advisers would oversee Iran's military and financial systems. Fearing the worst for Iran, he led a feverish campaign against the deal in Europe and wrote to the League of Nations asking for help in the matter. Mossadegh returned to Iran after the Majlis rejected the deal.

Mossadegh's reputation as an honest, fair and concerned politician preceded his return to Iran. On his visits to Fars province, he was warmly welcomed by the local population and offered the post of governor, which he accepted. Within months, he resigned in protest at the British-inspired coup d'état in Tehran in 1920 that led to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925.

However, he served as Minister of Justice in Prime Minister Ghavam's government before becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs. In 1923, Mossadegh was elected to the Fifth Majlis and began his historic opposition to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty by Reza Khan, then Prime Minister of Iran and supported by the British.

He foresaw the return of dictatorship to Iran "when one man is king, prime minister and magistrate at once!"

As Mossadegh had predicted, life under the tyrannical rule of Reza Shah was harsh and oppressive; In fact, the political climate had become so unbearable that he had good reason to fear for his life. In 1928, he voluntarily retired from social and political activism and retired to his village of Ahmad-Abad, about a hundred kilometers from Tehran.

During this period, which lasted more than a decade, he devoted his time to reading and cultivating the land, conducting experiments to improve agricultural production and sharing the knowledge acquired with other farmers in the village.

On July 26, 1940, Reza Shah's police broke into Mossadegh's house, searching and looting it. Although no incriminating evidence was found against him, he was taken to Tehran's central prison. Mossadegh was interrogated and, without being informed of the charges against him, transferred to the fortress of Birjand (a city in northeastern Iran). Aware of the fate reserved for many others who had dared to oppose the arbitrary rule of Reza Shah, he hoped that he would be killed.

The hardest blow Mossadegh received from his imprisonment was the effect it had on his 13-year-old daughter, Khadijeh, who had witnessed her father's brutal arrest and forced transfer to Birjand prison. The very sensitive Khadijeh was deeply traumatized and spent the rest of her life in psychiatric hospitals. Mossadegh later declared that this tragedy was the cruelest punishment that could have been inflicted on him.

Reza Shah released Mossadegh from Birjand prison in November 1940 and transferred him to Ahmad-Abad, "to live there until his death." A year later, his house arrest came to an end when the British forced the abdication of Reza Shah and his 22-year-old son, Mohammad Reza, ascended the throne.

After resuming his political activities, Mossadegh was elected with overwhelming support to represent Tehran in the 14th Majlis in 1944. During his tenure in the Majlis, Mossadegh fought passionately for Iran's political and economic independence from foreigners, especially attacking the unfair oil deal with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, for which he received overwhelming popular support.

Iran's contemporary history has been tied to oil, a source of energy highly coveted by the West, since 1901, when William Knox D'Arcy, a British subject, obtained exclusive rights for 60 years to explore and exploit oil in Iran's southern provinces. In 1908 oil was discovered and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was created.

Just before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the British government bought 51% of the company's shares. The British thus created a beachhead and practically colonized southwestern Iran, interfering directly and indirectly in the political affairs of the entire country. APOC defrauded the meager 16% paid to Iran and treated Iranian oil workers with contempt and racism in their own country. The situation came to a head in July 1946, when some 6,000 Iranian oil workers went on strike in Agajari. Their confrontation with government troops resulted in more than 200 dead and wounded.

Mossadegh envisioned an independent, free and democratic Iran. He believed that no country could be politically independent and free if it did not first achieve economic independence.

In his opinion, "the moral aspect of the nationalization of oil is more important than the economic one." He tried to renegotiate and get a fair and equitable restitution of Iran's rights, but was met with the company's intransigence. To end 150 years of British political interference, economic exploitation and plundering of Iran's national resources, Mossadegh organized the nationalization of the oil industry.

On March 8, 1951, Mossadegh first presented the idea of nationalization to the Petroleum Commission, created by mandate of the Majlis. The next day, the National Front, a multi-party coalition, organized a large rally in Baharestan Square, opposite the Majlis, in support of the nationalization of oil.

On the eve of the Iranian New Year, March 20, 1951 [29 Esfand 1329], the National Front bill for the nationalization of oil received final approval by the Senate, a few days after being unanimously approved by the deputies of the Majlis. A month later, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh was appointed Prime Minister, a position he obtained with the votes of almost 90% of the deputies present.

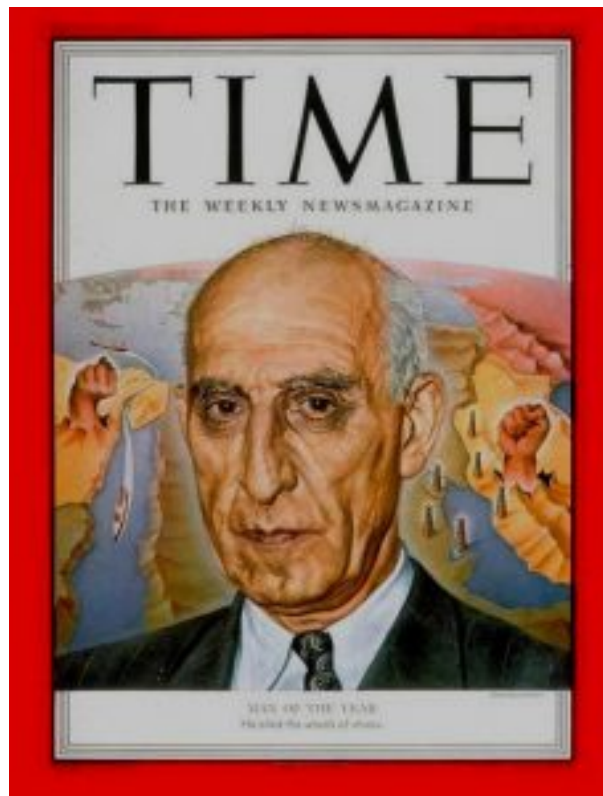


Mossadegh carried in triumph by the crowd after the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which was dismantled, continued with no solution in sight, increasing tensions between Iran and Britain. The British government imposed economic sanctions on Iran and threatened a military strike. In June 1951, the Iranian government uncovered a British spy network that revealed the subversive activities of a large number of Iranian politicians and journalists, including communists who received bribes from the British government and the AIOC.

The Iranian government reacted by closing the British consulate. The British government responded by calling its ambassador, Francis Shepherd, to London. In October 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh traveled to New York to personally defend before the United Nations Security Council Iran's right to nationalize its oil industry. The British government, seeking support, had taken his case to the UN to be heard. Mossadegh made a spectacular and successful presentation, demonstrating that Britain's oil profits, in 1950 alone, were higher than what it had paid Iran for the previous half-century.

Mossadegh then traveled to Washington, where he met with President Harry S. Truman. His visit was widely covered by newspapers, magazines, television and newsreels. On his return to Iran in November 1951, he stopped at Cairo's Farouk Airport in Egypt, where he was greeted by thousands of fans chanting "VIVA MOSSADEGH" and "VIVA IRAN".

During his four-day visit, Egypt's king, prime minister, cabinet and other dignitaries personally paid tribute to Mossadegh, and Cairo City Hall hosted a gala dinner in his honor. In January 1952, Mossadegh was named Man of the Year by Time magazine, his second cover in the space of 7 months.



"The Man of the Year" Oiled the Bearings of Chaos (sic) TIME Magazine, January 7, 1952

In June 1952, Mossadegh traveled to The Hague (Netherlands) and submitted nearly 200 documents to the International Court on the highly exploitative character of the AIOC and the extent of its political intervention in the Iranian political system. "There is no political or moral criterion by which the Court can measure its judgment in the case of the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran," he declared, and "we will not accept the Court's jurisdiction over this matter under any circumstances. We cannot place ourselves in the dangerous situation that could result from the Court's decision." The verdict was later announced and Mossadegh returned to Tehran after gaining the respect of the judges.

Back in Iran, economic and security conditions deteriorated rapidly, exacerbated by the increasingly subversive activities of foreign powers and their agents. In a meeting in July 1952 with the young monarch Mohammad Reza Shah, who headed the army, Mossadegh asked for control of the armed forces, which was denied. In response, Mossadegh immediately tendered his resignation as Prime Minister.

The next day, at the request of the British and American governments, the Shah appointed Ghavam Saltaneh as Prime Minister, who adopted a hard line, which only served to inflame the anger of the population that had taken to the streets in support of Mossadegh.

During the largest street demonstration, on July 20, 1952 (30 Tir 1331), security forces violently clashed with demonstrators, killing hundreds of people. The shah, seeing the extent of public support for Mossadegh, became alarmed and changed course. He appointed Mossadegh to the dual position of Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, as allowed by the Constitution.

That same day, the International Tribunal in The Hague ruled in favor of Iran, finding that it had no jurisdiction over the oil dispute. The United Nations Security Council then rejected the British complaint against Iran. Mossadegh was at the peak of his power and popularity, hailed as a hero not only in Iran but throughout the Middle East.

As Iran's leader, Mossadegh sponsored laws for "clean government" and independent judiciary, defended freedom of religion and political affiliation, and promoted free elections. She carried out numerous social reforms and fought for the rights of women, workers and peasants. A fund was set up to finance rural development projects and help farmers. In keeping with his policy of "negative equilibrium," an idea that contributed to the formation of the non-aligned movement, Mossadegh also refused to grant an oil concession to the Soviet Union.

More importantly, Mossadegh contributed to a national self-sufficiency that has never been matched in Iran since coming to power: he balanced the budget, increased non-oil

production, and created a trade balance. His policy was often opposed by the Shah, army generals, prominent clerics, landowners, the Toudeh (communist) party, and the British and American governments. However, Mossadegh could always count on the support of the people.

Meanwhile, the British continued to undermine Mossadegh's authority by inciting division within the country, tightening the global embargo on purchases of Iranian oil, freezing Iranian assets, and threatening Iran with invasion by creating a naval force in the Persian Gulf.

All these attempts failing, Britain came to the conclusion that "Mossadegh must go" by any means necessary. In collaboration with the CIA, they fomented a coup to overthrow the democratically elected government.

On August 15, 1953, with the participation of the Shah and his Iranian collaborators, a plan drawn up by the CIA under the code name "Operation Ajax", led by Kermit Roosevelt, was launched, but it failed to dislodge Mossadegh from power.

On the second attempt, on August 19, 1953 [28 Mordad 1332], the government was violently overthrown. Mossadegh escaped capture, but his house was invaded, looted and burned. The next day, Mossadegh surrendered to the authorities and was imprisoned. During this bloody episode, several hundred people were killed or injured. Mossadegh's supporters were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even killed. Mossadegh's foreign minister, Dr. Hossein Fatemi, went into hiding but was captured a few months later. He was beaten, stabbed 5 times by Shaban Jafari, a former fighter nicknamed "Brainless" and, after a show trial, executed by firing squad.

The reign of terror had begun.



Tried as a traitor by a military tribunal on December 19, 1953, Mossadegh declared: "Yes, my sin – my great sin ... and even my greatest sin - is to have nationalized the

Iranian oil industry and to have put an end to the system of political and economic exploitation of the largest empire in the world... At the cost of my life and that of my family, at the risk of losing my life, my honor and my property... With God's blessing and the will of the people, I fought against this savage and appalling system of international espionage and colonialism."

«...] I am well aware that my destiny must serve as an example for the future throughout the Middle East to break the chains of slavery and servitude to colonial interests."



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