

ROUNDTABLE: MOSSADEQ’S OUSTER AT 70 – LEGACIES AND MEMORIES

The Legacy of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq

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“Yes, my sin—my greater sin and even my greatest sin is that I nationalized Iran’s oil industry and discarded the system of political and economic exploitation by the world’s greatest empire. This at the cost to myself, my family; and at the risk of losing my life, my honor, and my property.” — Mohammad Mosaddeq at his tribunal, December 1953

In 2005, on a trip to Iran, I decided to go to Ahmadabad and take a video of the place. I had many reasons for doing so. One was for my own gratification; another was to honor my father. My father, Nosratollah Amini, was Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq’s personal attorney, and the only one besides the immediate family who had permission to visit him during his years of house arrest from 1956 until his death in 1967. Even Jawaharlal Nehru of India, who during a visit to Iran had asked to see him, was dissuaded from doing so. He was told that Mosaddeq was sick, which was not true.¹

I embarked on this trip with my late friend, Ahmad Shayegan, the son of Dr. Seyed ‘Ali Shayegan, Dr. Mosaddeq’s minister of education. We drove to Ahmadabad, a village some 90 kilometers west of Tehran. You go through the bustling city of Karaj before you reach Ahmadabad. On the way, we stopped to ask for directions from a man who owned a garage. When we told him where we were headed, he said, “Oh, you are going to that great man’s house.” We nodded in agreement. The caretaker of Ahmadabad, Mr. Abolfazl Takrusta, at that time told us that, to him and the villagers, Mosaddeq was not just a landlord, but also a father figure and a teacher. He helped all the villagers. He brought teachers from Taleqan, a nearby city known for its highly literate population, to teach them how to read and write.²

We spent more than two hours at the estate, which was in a dreary, dilapidated condition. The estate had been abandoned, and on top of that a recent earthquake had caused major damage. In each room, Ahmad and Mr. Takrusta explained the photos hanging on the walls and gave me a lesson in the history of the place and of the man. In one of the rooms, all the documents related to the purchase of food for the estate were in an open closet, covered in dust. In his meticulous way of doing all things, Dr. Mosaddeq had kept a record of the daily purchases for the estate.

Whereas Ahmadabad has been totally ignored, palaces from the Pahlavi period (1925–79) have been kept intact. People now visit these palaces, but barely anyone visits Mosaddeq’s humble estate. Public viewing is anyhow not permitted. Mosaddeq’s car was there in a little museum created by his family members. The entire building was in total disarray and looked like it was about to collapse. Since my visit, Ahmadabad has been renovated, but it is still not accessible to the public.

¹ Fariba Amini, “Conversations with My Father: Nosratollah Amini,” Iranian.com, 27 February 2007, <http://www.iranian.com/FaribaAmini/2007/February/Father/index.html>. My visit will be featured in a forthcoming documentary I am producing, *Ahmadabad: The Life and Times of Mohammad Mosaddeq in Internal Exile*, to be released in fall 2024.

² Interview of Mr. Takrusta by the author, 2005, in Ahmadabad, Iran.

In a country that appreciates its statesmen (or has respect for history and legacy), such estates should have been preserved as museums for all to visit. But both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic have been determined to make sure that the memory of Mosaddeq is lost. However, their attempt is futile. I remember right after the 1979 revolution, over a million people drove, took buses, and even walked to his estate to pay tribute to a man who had been shunned by the shah for nearly twenty-five years, since the 1953 coup. It was an amazing gathering at which various luminaires spoke, among them Ayatollah Mahmud Taleghani of *Nezhāt-e Azādī* (the Freedom Movement), Dr. Heda Matin-Daftari, Mosaddeq's grandson and the founder of *Jebheh-ye Demokratik-e Melli* (the National Democratic Front of Iran), and Taher Ahmad Zadeh, a religious nationalist who later became a minister under the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan (February–November 1979) and whose sons Mas'ud and Majid had been tortured and executed under the Pahlavi regime. Masoud Rajavi, the leader of the Islamic guerilla movement *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, also spoke. However, in a speech a few days later Ayatollah Khomeini said, "Whoever is not on the path of Islam is our enemy. To have meetings for some bones is not tolerable," and "He [Mosaddeq] was slapped on the face and if he had stayed, he would have slapped Islam."³

On May 19, 1979, the date many take to be the anniversary of Mosaddeq's birthday, a large gathering took place on the lawn of Ayramehr University of Technology (now Sharif University). The main speaker was my friend's father, Dr. 'Ali Shayegan. More than twenty-five organizations and their supporters attended the meeting, among them *Mojahedin, Fedayeen*, several women's organizations, the Association in Support of a Free Press, various ethnic organizations, the lawyers' guild of Iran, and many more. At the initiative of the National Democratic Front, this day was named the *Ruz-e Azādī-ye Bayan va Matbu'at* (Day of Freedom of Speech and the Press). This was unprecedented; there had been no such events or gatherings since the 1953 coup that brought Mossadeq's government down.

All these people gathered around a man who was the emblem of the rule of law and democracy in Iran. Poets wrote about him, among them Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Shafiei Kadkani, Nemat Mirzazadeh, and many more. Pahlavi Avenue in Tehran was renamed Mosaddeq Avenue soon after the revolution, but then it was changed to Valiasr, referring to Khomeini. It is the long boulevard connecting southern Tehran to the city's northern quarters, with views of the magnificent mountains north of the city. There is a parkway named after Ayatollah Abol Qasem Kashani, who is a hero to the Islamic Republic, but until recently no street bore the name of Mosaddeq, the man who defended his nation against two superpowers. When Dr. Mosaddeq triumphantly returned from the United Nations in New York City in 1951 via Cairo, he was welcomed as a hero. Various articles were written about him in the major Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*, and a street was named after him in Cairo.⁴ Mossadeq's name and his legacy are inscribed in the memory of many people. When his name is mentioned, people stand in awe. Photographs of him were carried during the 2009 Green movement and in subsequent demonstrations in Iran. Recently, in November 2023, an art exhibition opened in Tehran called *Ruzi Ruzegari, Mosaddeq (Once Upon a Time, Mosaddeq)*. Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, a prominent cartoonist and art professor, had asked his students to draw or paint an image of Mosaddeq. Hundreds of people, young and old, showed up for the exhibition. In all, forty-eight paintings were exhibited.

There is an amazing panoramic photograph I have on the wall of my living room, dated October 1951. It shows Dr. Mosaddeq and his entourage at the Columbia University Men's Faculty Club (Fig. 1). There are at least a hundred attendees—men and women, their faces so sharply outlined that one can make out each individual one. Mosaddeq stands in the middle, flanked by his foreign minister, Dr. Hossein Fatemi, who, shortly after the 1953 coup, while ill and on a stretcher, was taken and executed. Fatemi was a renowned journalist,

³ *Azadi Quarterly Review*, 26/27 (2001): 214–18.

⁴ Lior Sternfeld, "Iran Days in Egypt: Mossadeq's Visit to Cairo in 1951," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.



FIGURE 1. Mosaddeq at the Columbia University Faculty Club, 1951, during his visit to New York. Photograph, cropped from a panoramic view. Property of the author.

the editor of the newspaper *Bakhtar Emrooz* (Today's West), and a diplomat. In fact, it was he who had proposed the oil nationalization to Mosaddeq. In the photograph, there are young people, students, faculty, and ordinary people. It shows the extent of Mosaddeq's popularity, and the admiration of different generations. A child is standing in the very front of the photograph, and then a few students, one of whom I knew personally; he was the father of a friend of mine who was studying at Columbia at the time.

A student from the provinces who now lives in the United States told me that he came to appreciate Mosaddeq when he started reading his work. His family in northern Iran was

pro-Mosaddeq, but what he knew about the history of that time he had learned himself. He told me that he had been told very little about Mosaddeq in school and that his own curiosity had led him to do his personal research on the period. What Mosaddeq taught him, he related, was unrelenting defense of one's nation without asking for anything for oneself. What he learned was that Dr. Mosaddeq was one of the few politicians who was incorruptible in a country where corruption was rife.

On that same visit, I noticed that in many bookstores books on the coup and Mosaddeq were sold. In fact, I had taken copies of my own book, *Nameha'i az Ahmad Abad* (Letters from Ahmadabad) to a bookstore, and within twenty-four hours they were sold out.⁵ The owner told me to bring some more, but I had none left. Since then, on two subsequent trips to Iran, in 2017 and 2019, we visited the many bookstores in front of Tehran University, and translations of various books on Mosaddeq, written by American and Iranian scholars, were even more visible. Of course, Tehran holds one of the largest book fairs in the world for almost a week each year.

In recent years, especially after the emergence of the Women, Life, Freedom (Zan, Zendagi, Azadi) movement and in the context of the overall struggle within Iran and outside the country among the diaspora, there has been a new surge of infighting between the pro-monarchy and pro-Mosaddeq forces. On various social media, on Facebook and Clubhouse, the discussions become heated to the point that the participants hurl all kinds of insults at each other. Sometimes, the debate is more civil and constructive, especially the discussions conducted inside Iran. Still, the pro-Reza Pahlavi people accuse the others without advancing any substantiated facts, and the argument always comes back to the 1953 coup. In fact, the pro-Pahlavi crowd still denies that there was a coup.

But Mosaddeq's legacy continues to shadow the opposition movement. The diaspora, in general, wants to see an end to clerical rule and envisions an Iran without the Islamic Republic but reflective of what goes on inside the country. When the movement inside Iran gains momentum, it immediately affects the psyche of those abroad. In many ways, there is nostalgia for the Pahlavi era. But Dr. Mosaddeq is part of this past as well, even though he was at odds with the shah. To many, Mosaddeq remains a hero, as is reflected by the fact that more books and articles have been written about him and his short-lived tenure as prime minister than about any other figure in Iran's modern history. Regardless of one's position on the matter, it is remarkable that, seventy years after the events, the 1953 coup d'état is still the object of heated debate among friends and foes.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to Professor Lior Sternfeld for including my article in this valuable publication. A special thanks to Farhad Diba who helped me with some new information. His *Mossadegh, A Political Biography* (1986), was recently translated and published in Iran. He is the nephew of Mohammad Mosaddeq. I dedicate this article to the memory of my brother, Mohammad Amini, who wrote a valuable book on Dr. Mossadeq and who, along with my father and two other brothers, visited him in Ahmadabad.

⁵ Fariba Amini, ed., *Nameha'i az Ahmad Abad, 1335-1345* (Washington, DC: Press Xpress, 2004).