

Iran coup: Tudeh's inglorious role

Torab Saleth reviews: Ervand Abrahamian, 'The coup: 1953, the CIA and the roots of modern US-Iranian relations', New Press, 2013, pp304, £16.84



Mohamed Mossadegh: took wind out of sails of opportunist official communists

With the continuing efforts made by the self-proclaimed global imperial power, the USA, to achieve 'regime change' in Iran, it is timely that a book about the 1953 coup - in which the US, with the help of the British government, carried out exactly such regime change - has been published. The coup was aimed against Mohammad Mosaddegh's National Front¹ government, which had nationalised the British-controlled Iranian oil industries.

If Los Angeles-based Iranian TV stations or Facebook campaigns have given the imperialists a false impression that a nation is waiting to be liberated by the US and its allies, this book should remind them why there is in fact still a deep and widespread hostility in Iran towards the USA and Britain: precisely because of this event.

The historical irony is that the forefathers of the current dictators in Tehran were indeed part of the very same 'pro-democracy' coalition of forces that helped the US in its 1953 coup. The Shi'ite hierarchy was instrumental in it. Indeed the coup succeeded at the second attempt because of the help accorded by Shi'ite rent-a-crowd mullahs. The same rabble-rousers who were instrumental in helping the CIA save the shah in 1953 organised riots two decades later in support of ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Indeed, the whole calamity called the 'Islamic Republic of Iran' would not have come into existence if it had not been for that coup.

The last century or so of Iranian history has been shaped by four such regime changes. The combined effects have held back the Iranian people's aspiration for democracy and progress enormously. The first was organised by the Russian Cossack army in order to place Mohammad Shah Qajar on the throne and defeat the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The second, in 1921, was organised by the British, who had by then taken over control from the Russians, to suppress the newly formed soviet republic in Gilan province and establish Reza Shah's military dictatorship, but the third one - carried out by the Allies during World War II - ousted the very same Reza Shah (for supporting Hitler). Finally the 1953 coup firmly reinstated his son on the throne. This book covers the latter part of the period leading up to the coup.

This last regime change reversed the democratic changes gained after the fall of Reza Shah's dictatorship, and installed a grateful pro-US shah carrying out pro-imperialist policies. These were directly responsible over two decades later for dropping political power into the lap of the mullahs - who, in terms of Iranian social history, could be called the last remnants of Asiatic despotism. Of course, the situation now is entirely different. Nevertheless, when one looks into this last example of US-led regime change in Iran one cannot but imagine what further horrors await us. I wonder what odds they will give against the next regime change leading to the rule of even more prehistoric thugs.

The coup, therefore, covers an important period in Iranian history. The author, once associated with the Tudeh Party,² is a well known historian of contemporary Iran and has published a number of important books. However, the stated aim of his current work is rather more limited. While Abrahamian knows well the discourse of the time and has the resources to dig deeper, he decided to limit the subject matter to challenging the narrative offered by US and British governments at the time: they had tried to negotiate in good faith, but because of Mosaddegh's intransigence had no alternative but to back the coup.

The hypocrisy behind this explanation has long been exposed and the book does well to go over the reasoning again. However, especially after the publication in recent years of diplomatic documents of the period, there is probably no-one left who still accepts such stories (with the exception, of course, of Fox News!).

The author concludes in the last chapter that the "dismantling of the Tudeh and National Front left a gaping political vacuum ... filled eventually by the Islamic movement". But in the light of such hindsight it would have also been helpful to examine in a little more detail the tendencies in that history and the role of the particular currents which set the scene for this later takeover. The coup not only marginalised the so-called "democratic and secular" forces (although calling Mosaddegh "secular" or the Tudeh Party "democratic" is hardly credible), but actually showed the bankruptcy of both bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism. This bankruptcy is not exclusive to Iran, of course. Syria, Egypt and Iraq have all suffered similar fates.

Indeed by limiting himself to the actual coup Abrahamian offers only a cursory glance at the period immediately after the war, without which the background to 1953 cannot be understood. He, therefore, conveniently omits the role of Tudeh and its effects on the workers' movement in Iran. The reader is left with no answers as to why the working class did not manage to play a more important role in the nationalisation movement and indeed how Mosaddegh succeeded in becoming the leader of this movement. On this important aspect of the period, even within its own scope, the book has many shortcomings.

The Tudeh Party was built in 1941 on the ashes of the old Communist Party of Iran (destroyed by the combined efforts of Reza Shah and Stalin³) and, as its name suggests (Tudeh means 'the multitude', 'the masses'), it was formed on the basis of 'popular front' policies promoted by the Soviet Union before and during the war. As Reza Shah's dictatorship had shut down all political parties, there were no bourgeois parties of any substance with which to form a popular front. The USSR, therefore, helped create one from scratch. At first it was not even claimed that Tudeh was a workers' party, let alone either communist. It even attracted 'intellectuals' who had been Hitler sympathisers only a few years earlier. But it grew rapidly to become the largest political party in Iran with a strong base within the new workers' movement which had started to organise and fight for its rights after the war.

Indeed the demand for the nationalisation of the oil industries was first raised by the striking oil workers. What appears so strange is the fact that the Tudeh Party, with its huge support amongst the striking workers, at no time attempted to radicalise this movement or raise the demand for nationalisation under workers' control. The reason was that it was at the time supporting the Soviet Union's bid for the oil concessions in the Caspian Sea. Instead, Tudeh joined Ahmed Ghavam's 1952 bourgeois government, which promised to accede to Soviet wishes. This government was against nationalisation and promoted what was called a "positive balance" in foreign policy, (ie, promising not only to respect British oil concessions, but to grant similar ones to the US in the Gulf and the Soviet Union in the Caspian Sea).

The book hardly deals with any of this. But the period was crucial in sidelining the workers' movement and led to the gradual rise to fame of Mosaddegh as the champion of Iranian independence. This is the same Mosaddegh who had earlier (during the 14th parliament) blocked the debate on nationalisation by asking

his followers to withdraw support for the bill proposed by a number of independent deputies. Once again the book does not mention any of this. The Soviet Union was duped by Ghavam's government into withdrawing support from the Azari and Kurdish national movements, paving the way for the brutal military repression by Tehran. The disastrous effects of this policy on the national movements in Iran cannot be underestimated.

The book discusses the strength of the Tudeh military organisation and discusses why the party did not carry out its own coup. But this is hardly the central question. The real criticism of Tudeh relates to the fact that it did nothing on the day of the coup, despite its military organisation, to help the popular resistance against the armed thugs roaming Tehran's streets. Furthermore, the book does not cover the period in which the Tudeh Party, having lost its influence within the nationalisation movement and having helped create the situation leading to Mosaddegh's leadership, instead of supporting nationalisation was calling it a sham and accusing its popular leader of being a US agent. Whilst the masses were mobilising around the nationalisation question, Tudeh members were busy collecting signatures for the first anti-cold war peace conference in Beijing.

So readers searching for crucial answers concerning the failure of the workers' movement to establish itself within the nationalisation movement and the role of the Tudeh Party in the fiasco that followed will be at a loss. Although the book mentions the fact that the Shi'ite hierarchy supported the coup, it does not detail this to any extent which would shed light on the rise to prominence of Khomeini's faction (whose Islamic government the Tudeh Party supported to the last breath of its jailed leaders).

However, despite all this, for those unfamiliar with the events of 1953 *The coup* is a very useful contribution - well researched, with plenty of new facts. If you want to know what an imperialist 'pro-democracy' movement looks like, this book explains in graphic detail its constituent parts and how it was bought and organised. US imperialists have used very similar tactics in many other countries.

Notes

1. A loose coalition of various bourgeois nationalist parties.
2. His current political affiliations are unknown. He has been living in the USA for many years and is now associated with the semi-official *Iranian Lobby* with its pro-regime leanings.
3. Four of its main leaders were executed in 1938 after the Moscow trials and there is also strong circumstantial evidence suggesting those at the top of the new party had a hand in the murder of a number of communist leaders imprisoned by Reza Shah.