

Iranian nationalism: A theoretical dilemma

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JAN 26 2009

In the age of globalisation and the emergence of unprecedented socio-political and economic interdependency, nationalism is remaining as one of the most powerful ideological invention of humanity. There is a vibrant debate regarding the origins of nationalism. On the one hand, the modernist claim that nationalism is a new socio-political phenomenon that appeared only in response to modernity and industrial revolution. On the other, primordialists argue the origin of nationalism goes far beyond the age of modernity, and it can be traced back to the time immemorial. Arguably, despite the disagreement on the origins, there is a consensus that nationalism is a powerful force for creation of collective identity and instrumental for the establishment and the consolidation of nation-states.

More recently, in the second part of the 20th century nationalism has been identified as a liberating discourse for *emancipation* from colonialism. The success of nationalist movements across the Third World in achieving national independence, hardly left any doubt that nationalism is an indispensable instrument of social mobilisation to challenge imperialism. Nationalism has been a prime factor for the shift of the monopoly of power from “other” (colonisers) to “us” (colonised) throughout the Third world.

This brief study aims to examine the emergence of Iranian nationalism and its implications of national independence in 1950s. Dr. *Mosaddegh* and his nationalist party *Jebhe Milli Iran* (Iranian National Front) will be the focus of this inquiry. In the first part, there will be a brief historical background to the origins of the party and the political climate of the time. In order to provide some analysis regarding their ideological motivations and the process of national mobilization the author will heavily rely on primary data such as Mosaddegh's public speeches. Some of his public speeches are currently available in medium of Persian in the official website of Iranian National Front. The relevant speeches have been sourced and translated into English. Finally, the author aims to discuss if the dominating discourses of nationalism such as modernism and primordialism can accommodate Iranian nationalist mobilisation theoretically.

The origins of the *Jebhe Melli Iran* (Iranian National Front) can be traced back to the Constitutional Revolution

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1905-1911, which led to the establishment of constitutional monarchy.[1] Iran never was officially a colony; nevertheless, in the beginning of the 20th century the country was under extreme economic control of the imperial powers of the time. The Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 led to a creation of two spheres of influence in the country. The northern part of the state was under the sphere of influence of the Tsarist Russia and British controlled the southern part. According to Iranian National Front's official website the imperial powers apart from exploiting the country's resources, they supported the despotic policies of their puppet ruling class in order to suppress any popular opposition, which was calling for the expulsion of the "*Estemargaran*" (exploiters).[2]

Until the end of WWII, the National Front did not play a significant role in Iranian politics. The political climate was very suppressive and most of large or small political parties were repressed. This repressive political condition remained in Iran until the allies occupied the country in 1941.[3] The occupation led to the abdication of Reza Shah in favour of his son and consequently it resulted to the restoration of constitutional order. As the outcome, free press revived and political parties including the National Front gained an opportunity to have a more active role in politics.[4] In 1949, for the *Majles's* election, (parliamentary election) the National Front succeeded to gain only eight seats including Mossadegh himself in a chamber of 130 deputies. [5]

One of the most important mandates of 16th *Majles* was to review the Anglo-Iranian treaty of 1933.[6] The treaty officially gave the largest portion of the oil's profit to a British company. Mossadegh by gaining support from other deputies started to call for the cancellation of the treaty as a whole. He argued, the revision would not change the unfair nature of the oil agreement and demanded the nationalisation of oil industry.[7] Soon the idea of nationalisation and its implications for national independence became an issue that drew intense public attention. The popularity of Mossadegh was growing on the daily bases and in May 1951, he was offered premiership; within a year, he became the symbol of Iranian struggle for independence and democracy.[8]

The nationalisation of oil industry did clearly jeopardise the immense British economic interests in Iran, which led to serious economic, diplomatic, and latter indirect military retaliation by Britain and her allies. Under extreme pressure, internally from the military and the new Shah and externally from Britain and the Western Camp Mossadegh kept stating, "I put my trust only in support of the Iranian people that is all".[9] This was an unprecedented statement by an Iranian leader to claim that, he completely relies on the popular support in order to enforce his policies. Arguably, such statements challenged the traditional expectation of the ruling class from the nation to be passive and alienated from politics. Unlike his predecessors, he invited the nation to be proactive and take matters into their own hands. This can be identified as a powerful inspiration that contributed to the process of national mobilisation. Today the followers of Mossadegh advocate that he was a leader who gained his legitimacy and strength from the nation, and

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only by the support of the nation he could confront the superpowers within the climax of the Cold War. In one of his radio broadcasts, he famously stated, “There is one unchallengeable principle that, any time a legitimate government faces difficulty, it should only refer to the nation, because the nation is the only source of power”[10] This was unprecedented to conceptualise nation as the only source of power in a country, where the absolute monarchy and authoritarianism have rooted in its history. For centuries, the real source of power was perceived to be the Shah, and the Shah was the “shadow of God on earth.”[11] .

In light of that, one of the key factors for the success of nationalist mobilisation was the consolidation of national consciousness and promotion of the idea that the nation is the real sovereign.[12] Mossadegh was the first nationalist leader who successfully mobilised people against imperialism without utilising religion. There are other precedences of social mobilisation against British imperialism in Iran. Tobacco Revolution 1880s can be used here as an example. The social classes were mobilised in order to respond to monopolisation of Tobacco Industry by British. Nevertheless, religion and *Ulama* (religious leaders) were the key factors behind the national mobilisation. Before Mossadegh, in absence of any other mobilising agencies such as political parties, religion was the only agency that could mobilise people. However, Mossadegh, as a secular leader by putting emphases on ‘national dignity’ and ‘national self-determination’ introduced a different form of mobilising force (nationalism) that was arguably as powerful as religion. In his speeches, he identified the consolidation of national consciousness as “national resurrection”[13]

Unlike other small nationalist movements in Iran Mossadegh did not necessarily refer to the so-called “glorious Persian history” to justify the necessity of national resurrection. However, he justified the importance of national awakening in respond to the contemporary ‘threats’ facing the nation such as imperialism. Arguably, he capitalized on factors that maximised the defensive nationalist sentiments in Iran. For example, very frequently he stated all Iranians share the experience of being exploited and being humiliated for centuries.[14] By identifying such commonalities, he urged the social groups to join his nationalist project to bring the ‘dignity’ back to the nation. He stated “ until the emergence of national movement, they [British] thought we exist only for being humiliated and exploited by the looters , now the nation is united ... we are the symbol of national resistance against the world imperialism” [15]

He strengthened the image of Iranian national identity by portraying it as an example of “free and dignified nation that never give-in to imperialism ”[16]. Mosaddegh kept insisting that the oil industry was nationalised by Iranians, not by the elites or a particular religious, social and ethnic group. He stated, “This is needless to say, the world has witnessed that, the national resurrection and the national achievement has been founded by no one but the nation

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itself. This is the immense strength of the nation that despite being empty handed and despite being subjugated by imperialism for 150 years; we managed to bring an end to the exploitations by the old thieves"[17]

By closely examining his speeches one can identify two important factor that he constantly employed to justify the necessity of national mobilisation against British.

First, he created this dichotomy of us versus them. 'Us' represented a 'humiliated' and 'exploited nation' who was subjugated for hundreds of years. 'Them' represented the so-called 'imperialist thieves', who would take any suppressive measures for 'looting' the national resources.

The second important factor was his insistence on the idea that "the nation is the only source of power". Arguably, this was an indication that if the nation is the only source of power; therefore, this is the very nation that can save itself from further exploitation and humiliation. In short, by stimulating or even provoking the nation about the level that they are humiliated, and in the same time by convincing them that they are the only source to change the situation, he mobilised the people and successfully nationalised the oil industry. Given the political climate and his unpopularity with the Shah and the military elite and more importantly with British, national mobilisation was the only way that he possibly could achieve his political objectives.

One can argue that, the notion of 'emancipation' was the principle ideological component of Iranian nationalism, which resonant the emergence of other national mobilisations across the Third World. Nationalism was perceived as a liberating instrument to mobilise the masses for the achievements of national self-determination and independence form the imperial powers.

Nonetheless, the notion of 'emancipation', which is a defining component of Third Worldnationalism is not addressed theoretically by the dominating, discourses such as modernism. Modernists seem to be too preoccupied with the economic and industrial conditions of the states as the only preconditions for the emergence of nationalism. They conceptualise nationalism, as a western phenomenon which only is compatible with the conditions of modern states.

Ernest Gellner argues : " nationalism and nations are sociologically necessary phenomenon of the modern, industrial epoch, emerging in the transition of modernisation" [18] in addition, from the socio-cultural point of view, Gellner argues, nations are expressions of a literate , school-transmitted 'high culture' supported by specialist and by a mass standardized compulsory public education system.

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However, one can raise a question here, if nationalism cannot emerge without the existence of pre-conditions such as so-called 'high culture' and 'industrialisation' what can explain the national mobilisations in *pre-industrial* societies across the Third World? From 1950s onwards, the world has witnessed the emergence of nationalist mobilisations in societies with limited industry and other legacies of modernity. The phenomenal increase of independent nation-states in pre-industrial and pre-capitalist societies can only manifest that the modernist fail to accommodate the Third World nationalism theoretically.

Despite a limited industrialisation at the beginning of 20th century, Iran hardly met the socio-economic criteria that the modernists are setting as preconditions for nationalism. Yet, there is a clear evidence of national mobilisation that emerged to challenge the status quo in the 50s.

Primordialism cannot fully explain Iranian nationalism either. Admittedly, primordialism can not even be defined as a theory, it is rather an approach that is like 'umbrella term' used by scholars who hold that nationality is a natural part of human beings, and that nations have existed since time immemorial.[19] Ozkirimli argues, "We cannot consider primordialist account of nationalism independently from the debate of ethnicity"[20] Historians such as Frantisek Palacky, Eoin MacNeill and Nicolae Iorga also claim that, nations are primordial entities that "are objectively identifiable through their distinctive way of life, their attachment to a territorial homeland and their striving for political autonomy".[21] As Smith notes, primordialist, in particular naturalists do not make a distinction between nation and ethnic group.[22] Therefore, according to the primordialist, ethnic collective identity and the collective desire for recognition and protection of that shared identity based on ethnicity results in nationalist mobilisation.

This approach is not compatible at all with the account of Iranian nationalism. Iranis consisting of multiple religious, ethnic and linguistic groups, each of which is normally concentrated in a specific province with their distinct characteristics. For example, Turks predominantly inhabit in the province of *Azerbaijan* and *Khuzestan* is largely an Arab populated Province. Therefore, any attempt to explain Iranian national mobilisation with the primordial account of nationalism is simply meaningless. If shared ethnicity was a factor, certainly, Turks in the north would not identify with the Arabs in the south and Persians would not cooperate with any of other ethnic groups. People's sense of obligation went beyond the boundaries of their distinct provinces and their sense of belonging to that wider entity (Iran) manifest, ethnicity and linguistic divisions were not principle factors behind Iranian nationalism in the 50s.

One can argue that, just in the same way that, the modernist are preoccupied with the economic conditions the primordialists are preoccupied with the *past*. They assert, The past is the story of nation's perpetual struggle for self-realisation. According to them, this is indeed the past that justify the necessity of national mobilisation to defend the

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common land.

Admittedly, the past and a shared history are very important factors for nation building and boosting the nationalist sentiments. However, a shared history in its own cannot lead to a nationalist mobilisation. For example, a shared history and religion of *Iranians*, created a collective sense of *Iranianness*. A collective consciousness of being Iranian was significant for creating this dichotomy of us versus them, which is essential for a national mobilisation. However, there must be something more than a shared history to urge the nationalist mobilisation. For example, a factor such as a perceived 'threat' against the nation can be instrumental for nationalist mobilisation. British Imperialism and a threat of being a colony was a 'threat' that necessitate the Iranian national mobilisation .

To conclude, the dominating discourses such as modernism and primordialism are unable to fully accommodate Iranian nationalism theoretically. Iranian nationalist mobilisation did not accrue in response to the *modern* economic and industrial conditions nor was it a result of ideological view of the past or a reflection of ethnic desire for recognition. 'Emancipation' was a defining ideological component of Iranian nationalism in 1950s. The most significant factor that contributed to the national mobilisation was the notion of national self-determination and liberation from British imperial dominance in the country. The nationalist demand would not be accommodated without the collective participations and pressure from various social classes, pressing for nationalisation of oil industry. The role of Dr.Mosaddegh and the National Front were vital in encouraging the nation to be proactive in order to challenge the status quo and above all the British economic domination. Mosaddegh described the nation as the real sovereign and the only source of power. This gave unprecedented confidence to traditionally disfranchised and passive social classes to join the National Front to protect the national resources. However, the triumph of Iranian nationalism was very short. In 1953, British and American intelligent services sponsored a coup to subvert the democratic parliament and more importantly overthrow the nationalist government of Mosaddegh. A short-lived success of Iranian national mobilisation for the achievement of self-determination was an example of anti-imperialist nationalism in the Third World.

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[20] Ibid, p 65

[21] Ibid, p 71

[22] Ibid, p 66-67

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