

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

The Other Fight: Women's Suffrage and Iran's Oil Nationalization

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Iran handed the world a surprise in 1951. That spring, its parliament voted to nationalize the country's lucrative petroleum industry. Euphoria spread as young Iranians tore down Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) signs and watched mighty Britain cower (temporarily) before the hero of Iran's oil nationalization, Mohammad Mosaddeq.¹ Stunned by this brazenness, an American summary posed the question on the minds of many diplomats: "How did nine Persian politicians win sufficient power to destroy the concession of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company?"² For the next two years the West tried to figure out how to confine this enormous shock to the petroleum market by focusing on the man it held responsible for the crisis. An aristocrat and seasoned politician, Mohammad Mosaddeq garnered the support he needed to break through the monopoly of the AIOC. With the world's attention on Mosaddeq and oil at the time, it was unclear to many (although not to Mosaddeq himself) that another monumental battle for the future of Iran was taking shape: the fight for women's suffrage.

The drama of oil nationalization had many acts, which scholars, documentary filmmakers, and others have explored. Still, we lack clarity about certain aspects of the coup. As historians David Painter and Gregory Brew observe in their recent perceptive study of the oil nationalization movement, the source materials contain "an unusual combination of too many and too few primary sources."³ Although many aspects of the debacle of 1953 have been addressed, most writers have given short shrift to the question of suffrage. During PMM tenure, the subject of women's suffrage was debated. Some recent works, however, have begun to explore this issue.⁴

Likewise, most historians who have explored the women's movement in the *longue durée* have not coupled the campaign for suffrage with the country's history of petroleum. Here, I argue that the fight for women's suffrage in Iran was entangled in the politics of oil (and vice

¹ "Iran Youths Raid Tehran Offices of Oil Company: Signs Ripped Down As Premier Gets New Confidence Vote on Nationalization," *Washington Post*, 22 June 1951.

² US Department of State, "Despatch from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State," No. 878, Tehran, 16 February 1952 (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, 65), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951-54Iran/d65>.

³ David S. Painter and Gregory Brew, *The Struggle for Iran: Oil, Autocracy, and the Cold War, 1951–1954* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 2.

⁴ Mattin Biglari, "Iranian Oil Nationalisation as Decolonisation: Historiographical Reflections, Global History, and Postcolonial Theory," in *Iran and Global Decolonisation: Politics and Resistance after Empire*, ed. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele (London: Gingko, 2023), 101–33. See also Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 193–96.

versa) from the outset. Both developments emerged in earnest from the constitutional period and became embedded in political conversations about Iran's sovereignty, democracy movements, and international standing.

A half-century before the majles vote to nationalize Iran's petroleum industry, another dynasty had granted an oil concession to a British subject named William Knox D'Arcy. At the time, few anticipated the enormous wealth that this venture would generate. After several years of drilling unsuccessfully for oil in southern Iran, the investors were losing hope, but in May 1908 oil gushed forth from a well in Masjed-e Solayman. Within a year, Britain had incorporated the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and began to solidify its control over the country's crucial economic resource.⁵

During that time, Iran had also passed through a major political upheaval, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Public figures, intellectuals, and politically conscious citizens debated the nature of constitutionalism as they inaugurated the country's parliament (majles). But shortly thereafter, a civil war erupted between proconstitutionalist and anti-constitutionalist factions, lasting from June 1908 until July 1909. The parliament was bombarded by the Russian-trained Persian Cossack Brigade, which interrupted constitutional rule and the country's first experiments with democracy. The civil war, known as the "lesser despotism" (*estebdad-e saghir*), severely tested the young parliament. The nation and its women resisted the onslaught, and when some degree of stability prevailed after July 1909, the parliamentarians deliberated over the country's electoral laws. It was then that the question of women's political participation became a matter of public debate. The question of women's suffrage emerged as a parallel political discourse alongside conversations about the country's budding petroleum industry.

Activist women and progressive men in Iran tried to make the case for women's voting rights, but they were rebuffed by conservative thinkers. In 1911, majles deputies considered the question of women's suffrage in discussions of the electoral laws, only to table the decision. The representative from Hamadan, Vakil al-Ro'aya, complicated the matter of denying women the right to vote by arguing that they too were "creatures of God."⁶ The debates over women's suffrage in Iran's fledgling parliament even attracted the attention of foreign observers, who reported on Vakil al-Ro'aya's bold support. One called him a "champion of women's cause."⁷ The young politician, Seyyed Hasan Taqizadeh, who would go on to assume many political roles in modern Iran, used secular arguments to push for women's electoral participation, but to no avail.⁸

Iranian women did not abandon the fight to gain the right to vote despite their setbacks during the constitutional years. After the Great War, several Iranian women participated in international organizations that supported women's rights and suffrage. Their activism even attracted the attention of American suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, who commented on the Babi iconoclast Tahereh Qorrat al-'Ayn and the daring activism of Iranian women.⁹

Perhaps the culmination of these efforts occurred when Iran organized one such gathering during the interwar years. The Second Eastern Women's Congress opened in Tehran in

⁵ See Katayoun Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), for a detailed and informative account of this history.

⁶ Cited by Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zanhā-yi Millat: Women or Wives of the Nation?" *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993): 55.

⁷ "Deny Women Have Souls: Persian Mejliss Ignores Appeal of Suffrage Advocate," *Washington Post*, 3 September 1911, 12. For more on the London *Times* coverage, see Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 203; and Mansour Bonakdarian, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911: Foreign Policy, Imperialism, and Dissent* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), ch. 4.

⁸ Iraj Afshar and Eir, "Taqizadeh, Sayyed Hasan: i. To the end of the Constitutional Revolution," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 3 February 2016, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/taqizadeh-sayyed-hasan-01>.

⁹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Ida Husted Harper, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage: 1900–1920* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1922), 852.

1932 as Iran was renegotiating with Britain the terms of the d'Arcy oil concession. Although the two events were unconnected, it is telling that the politics of Iran's oil industry and the fight for economic independence unfolded yet again alongside another persistent concern in modern Iranian society: gender equality. The Persian newspaper, *Shafaq-e Sorkh* (Red Aurora), edited by controversial writer 'Ali Dashti, covered both events as lead stories in late November 1932.¹⁰ The congress, which was first held in Damascus two years earlier and chaired by Lebanese activist Nur Hamada, brought prominent women's rights activists to Iran.¹¹ The Second Eastern Women's Congress, held from November 27 to December 2, 1932, called for women's suffrage and political participation in Iran, Syria, and elsewhere.¹²

During the interwar years, Iran's sovereign Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41) embarked on top-down modernization projects that included a platform for women's renewal (*tajaddod-e nesvan*) and the construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway. To pursue various endeavors, he needed additional funds, including from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which had reduced its royalties to Iran during the Depression.¹³ In 1932, Reza Shah canceled the D'Arcy oil concession, which even elicited concern in nearby Bahrain over "exploitation of the market by dealers."¹⁴ The following year Iran concluded a new contract intended to last until 1993. The renegotiated deal remained far from equitable but nonetheless gave the shah some necessary funds.¹⁵

The twin fights for economic independence and women's suffrage continued during World War II. The amphibious attack on Iran, undertaken by Great Britain and the Soviet Union on August 25, 1941, essentially robbed the country of its sovereignty for the duration of the global conflict. Britain tightened its grip over the oil installations as war materiel zigzagged across the country and made its way to the Soviet Union.¹⁶ An inexperienced monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi began his rule as the country endured foreign occupation. This interval brought an unanticipated opening that enabled new political parties and voices to emerge.

In 1943, an Iranian aristocrat, Safiyeh Namazi Firuz, organized the Women's Party of Iran (Hezb-e Zanan-e Iran) with another pioneer of women's rights, Fatemeh Sayyah.¹⁷ Some Iranian women looked to global events and participated in international organizations that brought their political concerns to the fore. The Tudeh (Masses), or Communist Party, which was founded in 1941, also organized a women's association (*tashkilat-e zanan*) during those years and proposed women's suffrage, but again to no avail.¹⁸ High-profile

¹⁰ *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, 8 Azar 1311/29 November 1932, 1.

¹¹ Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 83–106. See also Camron M. Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002).

¹² *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, 6 Azar 1311/27 November 1932, 1; *ibid.*, 8 Azar 1311/29 November 1932, 1; *ibid.*, 10 Azar 1311/1 December 1932, 1.

¹³ Amin Saikal, "Iranian Foreign Policy, 1921–1979," in *Cambridge History of Iran: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vol. 7, 432.

¹⁴ United Kingdom National Archives, IOR/R/15/2/873, "Effect of Abrogation of APOC Concession by Persian Government on Oil Market in Bahrain," 19 December 1932, File 39/2 (1 B/8), Qatar Digital Library, https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100025675083.0x00004a.

¹⁵ F. Kazemi, "Anglo-Persian Oil Company," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 15 December 1985 (updated 5 August 2011), vol. 2, fasc. 1, 61–65, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anglo-persian-oil-company>.

¹⁶ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), ch. 7.

¹⁷ Hamideh Sedghi, "Feminist Movements: III. In the Pahlavi Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 15 December 1999 (updated 26 January 2012), vol. 9, fasc. 5, 492–98, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/feminist-movements-iii>; Camron Michael Amin, "Globalizing Iranian Feminism, 1910–1950," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 6–30, <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2008.4.1.6>.

¹⁸ For an interesting study of this organization and of key leftist women, as well as insights on Jamileh Sadiqi, see Elaheh Habibi, "The Women's Association of the Tudeh Party of Iran, 1944–1948: The National and Transnational Struggles of a Left Feminist Group" (MA thesis, Central European University, 2014), [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj_p_bnpeeBAXWRGfKfHb5aACIQFnoECBMQAQ&url=https%](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj_p_bnpeeBAXWRGfKfHb5aACIQFnoECBMQAQ&url=https%3)

women such as activist Maryam Firuz had joined the Tudeh party because, to her, this option offered women the only viable path to political participation on an equal footing with men.¹⁹ Maryam Firuz hailed from the Qajar aristocracy, and her father, Abdol Hosayn Mirza Farman Farmaian, had served as prime minister under the last Qajar king, Ahmad Shah (r. 1909–25). Her brother, Nosrat al-Dowleh Firuz was foreign minister in 1919 and strived, in vain, to articulate Iran's right to postwar reparations. Politics was therefore a familiar stage for her. The activism of women such as Maryam Firuz who had deep political ties partly explains the recurrent coupling of suffrage with Iranian sovereignty.

As Iran faced Allied occupation during World War II, some influential men did not regard women's suffrage as a priority. One prominent figure even considered it a distraction from what he deemed women's principal roles, as mothers. On December 15, 1943, university professor and politician Sadeq Rezazadeh Shafaq (who would later represent Iran as a member of the delegation attending the San Francisco Conference in 1945) delivered a speech at the Women's Club, in which he implored Iranian women to embrace their roles as "loving mothers" and to focus on helping the needy instead of dwelling on suffrage. As he explained: "It is true that a number of noble and learned ladies have taken pains and created societies but all should join hands to help the community and avoid extremist bookish ideas of woman's suffrage, crowding about ballot boxes and stabbing each other for votes." The event and speech were evidently reported in the Persian journal *Iran-e Ma* (Our Iran), one of the few existing periodicals with circulation during the years of wartime occupation.²⁰ Shafaq's attitude toward women's suffrage indicated that for some prominent male figures women's issues remained peripheral and occupied a lower rung politically than other subjects. This included ridding the country of Soviet troops, which had not fulfilled their obligation to vacate Iran after the war. The newly created United Nations, superseding the League of Nations, promptly took up and adjudicated this matter.

Founded in 1945, the UN renewed momentum on the question of women's suffrage worldwide, including in Iran. As one of the original member states of the United Nations, the Iranian government recognized and voted in support of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. Article 21 of the declaration states the following: "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures." From the start religious conservatives opposed the state's support for women's growing involvement in politics. They expressed these opinions in periodicals with a distinctly religious tenor. One writer opposed women's involvement in politics and was dismayed that state officials consulted with women over political matters.²¹ 'Ulama' sensitivities to Iran's enthusiastic embrace of the UN and its precepts (even if not fully implemented by the ruling monarchy) were acknowledged when the state postponed its celebrations of United Nations Day, commemorated annually on October 24th, because it occurred in the Shi'a month of mourning, Muharram, and coincided with 'Ashura.²²

After the war many new women's journals and magazines emerged, some with titles that conveyed the defiant attitude of Iranian women in politics.²³ Many were aware of the

[3A%2F%2Fwww.etd.ceu.edu/2014/2/Fhabibi_elaheh.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1z6-dDrcdhhUrRkxYcfKYv&opi=89978449](https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2014/2/Fhabibi_elaheh.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1z6-dDrcdhhUrRkxYcfKYv&opi=89978449), especially pp. 75–80.

¹⁹ Maryam Firuz, *Khaterat-e Maryam Firuz (Farman Farmaiyan)* (Tehran: Ettela'at Press, 1387/2008), 32.

²⁰ Enclosure no. 1 with Despatch no. 772, 29 December 1943, from the American Legation, Tehran (History Vault, folder no. 003105-005-0049).

²¹ "Zanha dar Karhaye Siyasi," *Neda-ye Haqq*, no. 8, 10 Aban 1329/1 November 1950, 1. For more on these debates, see Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Global Civil Rights in Iran: Race, Gender, and Poverty," in *Iran and Global Decolonisation: Politics and Resistance after Empire*, ed. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet and Robert Steele (Richmond, CA: Gingko, 2024), 273–312.

²² "E'lamiyeh: Jam'iyat-e Irani Tarafdard-e Melal-e Mottahed," *Neda-ye Haqq*, no. 7, 3 Aban 1329/25 October 1950.

²³ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126.

expansion of women's rights in other Middle Eastern communities. Turkish women had gained the right to vote in 1934, and Arab women in Syria won voting rights in 1949, despite some limitations.²⁴ Iranian women therefore redoubled their efforts to bring attention to these matters through the print medium. One of these periodicals, *Zan-e Mobarez* (The Warrior Woman), edited by Kobra Saremi, appeared during the turbulent years of oil nationalization. She dedicated its first issue to Mohammad Mosaddeq, recognizing his "unforgettable" (*faramush nashodani*) support for Iran's oil independence movement and presumably of women's rights.²⁵ The launch of this journal coincided with the arrival of the Iranian New Year and brimmed with hope and a renewed commitment to the political fights that had consumed the country.

When Prime Minister Mosaddeq assumed power, he revisited (and supported) the issue of women's suffrage as part of the debates over revisions to the electoral laws. Several prominent women and women's organizations took up this cause even as they embraced the work of mothers and rural women. In January 1952, the Women's Organization of Iran forwarded to the Secretary General of the United Nations its objections to legal barriers to women's suffrage.²⁶ The question of open elections, meantime, continued dominating the domestic news. Later that year, when Mosaddeq resigned over his request for control of the armed forces, women participated fervently in the uprising of 30 Tir 1331 (July 21, 1952) that compelled the shah to oust the elderly Ahmad Qavam and return Mosaddeq to office. As reported by the mouthpiece of the Women's Organization of Iran, *Jahan-e Zanan* (Women's World), women's involvement in those demonstrations showed that no obstacle would prevent them from fighting for the independence of their country or from being politically engaged. This activism included marking the March 8th celebrations in Esfahan despite some initial resistance.²⁷ The political message of suffrage also was tied to celebrations of Iranian constitutionalism that took place on 14 Mordad (August 6). On that day in 1906, Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar had signed the decree enabling the creation of a parliament.²⁸

The stated objectives of the Women's Organization included support for national independence (*hefz-e esteqlal-e melli*) and efforts to uproot colonialism (*rishehkan kardan-e este'mar*), causes that encompassed oil nationalization and the right to self-determination.²⁹ Their social platform also called for improved economic and social services for children and the indigent such as the reduction of childhood illiteracy, and the lofty pursuit of world peace. The organization conspicuously embraced the role of women as mothers who were morally upright, devout, and politically conscious. Notably, the mother depicted in its logo wears a headcover, as many women of the era still opted to do, especially once mandatory unveiling had been discontinued as state policy (Fig. 1). The organization marked March 8 as International Women's Day to emphasize the unity of cause of Iranian women and the coalition of activist women worldwide (Fig. 2).

In November 1952, Premier Mosaddeq signed a bill for municipal elections that in principle extended the vote to women; the suggested parliamentary proposal did not do so, however.³⁰ An announcement about the parliamentary electoral proposal had generated debate, including concern that women's suffrage had not been specifically mentioned. An ally of Mosaddeq who headed the electoral commission, Ali Shayegan, explained the proposed

²⁴ US Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Women in the World Today: Political Rights of Women in Member Nations of the United Nations," International Report no. 2, August 1963, 17, <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/women-world-today-6568/political-rights-women-member-nations-united-nations-615366>.

²⁵ *Zan-e Mobarez*, 16 Farvardin 1330/6 April 1951, 1.

²⁶ "Iran's Women Seek Vote: Organization Protests to U.N., Saying Ban Violates Charter," Special to *The New York Times*, 17 January 1952, 2.

²⁷ *Jahan-e Zanan*, 13 Farvardin 1332/2 April 1953, 1. Also, *Jahan-e Zanan*, 3 Mordad 1331/25 July 1952, 7, in which the demand for women's suffrage through the UN was addressed.

²⁸ *Jahan-e Zanan*, 3 Mordad 1331/25 July 1952, 1.

²⁹ *Jahan-e Zanan*, 13 Farvardin 1332/2 April 1953, 1.

³⁰ Fakhreddin Azimi, "Elections: i. Under the Qajar and Pahlavi Monarchies, 1906–1979," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 15 December 1998 (updated 13 December 2011), vol. 8, fasc. 4, 345–55, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/elections#i>.



Figure 1. *Jahan-e Zanan*, 13 Farvardin 1332/2 April 1953.

differences intended to broaden participation, but the bill remained silent (*maskut*) on women's voting rights.³¹

Iranian suffragists encouraged women to participate in city council elections as a necessary step toward realizing gender equality.³² At the same time, they focused on the day-to-day struggles of the working classes and rural communities. Many women of this era embraced motherhood, but with a twist: as activists. The trope of mother-activist pushed back against criticism of political women as brazen figures who were shirking their family responsibilities to promote their political involvement.

Several opponents of the Iranian women's movement were reluctant to acknowledge women's participation in the country's political struggles. The journal *Jahan-e Zanan* recalled that history by highlighting women's direct action in campaigning for freedom and equality. At the same time, it shared international news about women's congresses and transnational activism. In March 1953, as plans to oust Prime Minister Mosaddeq were solidifying abroad, the journal discussed plans for the opening of the World Congress of Women in Copenhagen, Denmark, to be held in June of that year. The organization's (*Sazman-e Zanan-e Iran*) crusading was both local and global. Its participants shared international news about women's global political activism even as they tried to improve the status of women at home. In striving to mark new milestones for Iranian women, they recalled past struggles and supported ongoing objectives. On the forty-seventh anniversary of the signing of the royal decree (August 6, 1906) that had granted the creation of the Iranian parliament by Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1896–1907; Fig. 3), the organization marked the occasion by highlighting women's roles in society. In addition, there were sharp objections to women's inability to take part in the national referendum for the dissolution of the Seventeenth Majlis in August 1953 (Fig. 4). While women had lined up in orderly fashion to vote, the national guards had prevented their participation. The organization wasted no time in lambasting this act and in stressing the deprivation (*mahrumiyat*) of Iranian women.³³

³¹ *Kayhan*, 15 Aban 1331/6 November 1952, 1, 3, 4; *Kayhan*, 19 Aban 1331/10 November 1952, 1–2.

³² *Jahan-e Zanan*, 20 Aban 1331/11 November 1952, 1.

³³ *Jahan-e Zanan*, 16 Mordad 1332/7 August 1953, 1.

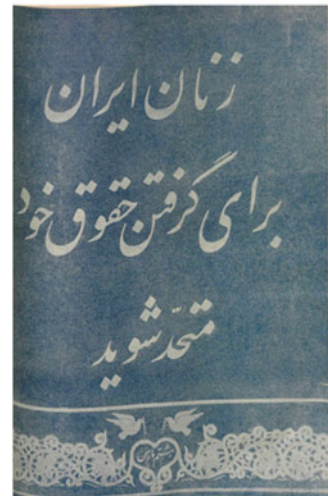


Figure 2. *Jahan-e Zanan*, no. 17, 16 Esfand 1330/7 (or 8) March 1952, front cover and back cover. The back cover text says, “Women of Iran, unite to gain your rights.”

In 1954, after the oil nationalization debacle, there were still only sixty member states in the United Nations that had granted women the right to vote on an equal footing with men. Six others enabled limited voting, and seventeen other countries, which included Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen, among a handful of Latin American countries, still had not extended the franchise to women. According to Lorena B. Hahn, United States Representative on the Commission on the Status of Women, Iran was the lone member country on the commission in which women still lacked the ability to vote.³⁴ In 1960, American Embassy personnel in Tehran observed pessimistically, “The suffrage campaign has so far been ineffectual and appears unlikely to be successful for many years to come.” This report continued, “The majority of women leaders and feminist groups still consider the fight for suffrage rights the motivating force behind all that they do.” Despite their valiant efforts, however, progress on this front appeared “unimpressive.” When women leaders approached Manuchehr Iqbal and Ja’far Sharif-Emami, who had served successive terms as prime minister, the men apparently made “some bland and meaningless statements of support.” In

³⁴ Lorena B. Hahn, “The U.N.’s Role in Improving the Status of Women,” Eighth Session of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, in *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 31, part 1 (Bureau of Public Affairs, 1954), 23.



Figure 3. Celebrations on the Anniversary of the Constitutional Revolution. *Jahan-e Zanan*, 16 Mordad 1332/7 August 1953.

addition, there was the sense that some women engaged in self-promotion, working to get “themselves elected as the first woman Deputy or Senator in Iran.” This situation was compounded by the usual cynicism that voting mattered little in a country that lacked political freedom. The patriarchal climate in Iran, in which “the cold shoulder [was] given the campaign by almost all male politicians” left “the suffragettes in a fairly hopeless predicament.”³⁵ The country’s mood after oil nationalization had soured, as elections were canceled and the political culture grew autocratic and remained patriarchal.

The activism of Iranian women in support of suffrage after the oil nationalization crisis did not yield immediate results. The failure renewed energies in favor of voting rights, until nearly three years later, in 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79) finally paved the way for women’s political participation in the electoral process. Suffrage came to women wrapped in a package of reforms supported by the United States and reviled by conservative ‘ulama’. Later that year, traditional religious voices, including the future spiritual leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, participated in antiregime protests that took issue with platforms in the shah’s White Revolution, which also had enabled women’s suffrage. In 1963, telegrams issued by leading Shi’a scholars articulated these positions (Fig. 5). Such critics considered women’s right to vote less controversial than the possibility of women holding elected offices.³⁶ Leading ‘ulama’ also objected to the possibility of non-Muslim majles

³⁵ American Embassy in Tehran, Despatch no. 248, 9 November 1960 (History Vault, folder no. 009237/009237-014-0044).

³⁶ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 204.



Figure 4. Women prevented from participation in the referendum. *Jahan-e Zanan*, 23 Mordad 1332/14 August 1953.

representatives such as Bahais overseeing large non-Muslim populations and even allowing some elected officials to use a holy book other than the Qur'an for the swearing-in ceremony.³⁷ In this way, women's suffrage became not just a fight about voting rights but political power, moving beyond questions of national sovereignty and enfranchisement to matters of religious authority. A new fight was brewing over the identity of Iran, with women as its locus.

The Anglo-American intervention engendered many tragedies: it robbed Iran of the possibility of political democracy; it placed limits on the country's economic autonomy; and it

³⁷ National Library and Archives of Iran (NLA), File 280/3714, 1341/1962–63. The texts of these telegrams from leading Iranian 'ulama' expressed the objections of the religious leadership to women's enfranchisement.

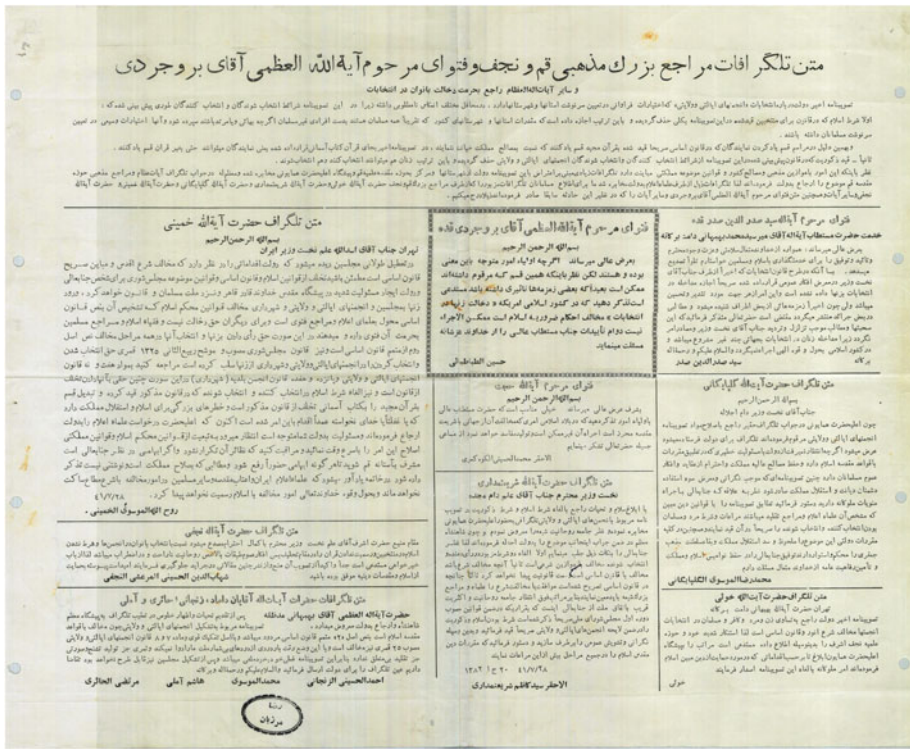


Figure 5. Texts of the telegrams from the leading 'ulama' of Qom and Najaf and the fatwa of the late Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi regarding the respectability of women's involvement in elections. 1341/circa 1963.

irrevocably delayed women's democratic participation in the country. The National Front party fell into disarray and could never launch an effective comeback, especially after Mosaddeq died in 1967, having been kept under house arrest after the coup. Despite women's support for oil nationalization, they were again rebuffed as citizens with full rights in another of the country's monumental political battles. Like the fight for oil nationalization, the women's struggle to win the vote in Iran grappled with questions of equity, equality, enfranchisement, and inclusion. This battle should never have been a sideshow, but a key narrative in Iran's painful fight for sovereignty and democracy.

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