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Along The Road Toward Dictatorship

The ultimate test of a popular leader comes when - placed in a position of power - he must choose between the legitimate use or the deliberate abuse of this power.

As a member of the Majlis of Iran in the years which followed our two world wars, Mossadeq consistently defended democratic principles and spoke against the imposition of martial law, against suppression of the press, against rigged elections, against illegal arrests and against all acts by governments in power which violated the spirit or letter of the country's constitution.

Primarily reputed as a doggedly determined, long-winded orator, he was swept into the office of Prime Minister as the most persistent spokesman of the ultra nationalistic sentiments of his countrymen. Once in office a new character unfolded to reveal Mossadeq as a shrewd, persuasive demagogue, capable of taking any and all measures required to maintain his position. His decision was to abuse his power. All those measures which he had so ardently condemned were now imposed upon the people: continuous martial law; a stringent law controlling the press; interference with and cancellation of elections; denial of freedom of speech and of assembly; and illegal arrests, torture and detention. By threat, persuasion and manoeuver he took over command of the armed forces from the Shah, their constitutionally appointed leader, and by similar tactics he got the Majlis to grant, and then to renew, full powers over the affairs of state. With these powers he could take over the legislative functions of the government.

Criticism of such actions was forthcoming and as the months passed, Mossadeq became increasing intolerant of criticism. Although his supporters could muster a majority in the Majlis, he resented the fact that a strong minority in that body attacked the unconstitutionality of his deeds. This 17th Majlis, which he had earlier described as being the first term of the body to truly represent the people of the country, he now resolved to destroy. The first move was to force his supporters to resign so that no quorum could be obtained. Charged with the illegality of this move, he determined that the Majlis must be dissolved. Since the constitution of Iran states that only the Shah may dissolve the Majlis, some illegal manoeuver had to be found. This Mossadeq found in his scheme to hold a "popular referendum" on the question of whether the Majlis should be dissolved, and in support of this move he came up with the alarming statement that "in democratic and constitutional countries no law is greater than the will of the people" (speech of Mossadeq over Radio n, Tehran of 27 July 1953).

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Mass meetings were arranged to express the "will of the people" and groups assembled by the government were led in the chant "Mossadeq is victorious" in a manner only too reminiscent of meetings held in Europe in the 1930's. Even larger groups of communists, members of the Tudeh party of Iran, massed to throw their weight behind Mossadeq. They chanted no such slogan but, following the orders of their Soviet masters, eagerly helped to stir up public confusion and uncertainty.