

Lifestyle

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This photo shows a devotee dressed as the Hindu goddess Kali during the last day of the Navaratri Hindu festival in Bangkok. — AFP

Filmmaker sheds new light on Britain's role in 1953 Iran coup

Filmmaker Taghi Amirani calls them the documents that changed the fate of his country, casting light on Britain's role in organizing the overthrow of Iran's leader six decades ago. His film, "Coup 53", screened at the London Film Festival last weekend, purports to find fresh evidence that a British spy spearheaded the ousting of popular prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953. With the help of the CIA, the covert operation led to the removal of Mossadegh, who had ruled London by moving to nationalise the UK-controlled oil industry.

The United States effectively conceded playing a role when in 2013 it released some CIA archives showing its involvement, but Britain has never admitted its part in the plot. Amirani, an Iranian physicist turned award-winning filmmaker who has been based in London for 45 years, said finding proof that an agent from Britain's MI6 intelligence agency coordinated the coup was "a monumental lightbulb moment". "It will in a way confirm everything Iranians have been saying for decades about the Brits," he told AFP in an interview at the festival, where his film is competing for a best documentary prize.



Iranian director Taghi Amirani, left, and US editor Walter Murch of the film 'Coup 53', pose in London. — AFP

"The Brits are famously known in Iran as 'the old fox'... there's huge distrust." Amirani said 1953's events were "more relevant than ever" and help explain the current heightened tensions between Iran and Britain and the US. "No one can claim to really understand the dynamics and the volatile relationship... well unless they know what happened in '53," he added. "It casts a lot of light on this."

A lightning bolt

Appointed prime minister in 1952, Mossadegh quickly became a hugely popular leader inside Iran but irked the British by moving to take over the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the predecessor of modern-day BP. He had also angered the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, by trying to limit his powers and the king left the country later that year in protest. In August 1953, a military coup saw Mossadegh arrested and then jailed for three years, before

being placed under house arrest. He died in 1967.

The shah returned immediately after the ousting to rule Iran for nearly three decades, before he was then overthrown in the 1979 Islamic revolution. Together with Oscar-winning editor Walter Murch, Amirani uses never-seen-before archival footage, interviews with historical figures and new research to forensically examine the events. "Like all counter-intelligence stuff there's a lot of smoke drifting over the tracks of who did what when," said Murch, whose credits include "Apocalypse Now" and "The Godfather" movies.

"But the film really does throw a lightning bolt across that landscape that makes it very clear what was going on." The pair stumbled upon a 1980s British TV documentary which had identified and interviewed a former MI6 operative named Norman Darbyshire, who admitted helping mastermind the coup. The now-deceased Darbyshire is conspicuously absent from the program that aired, with suggestions the British government may have intervened to have him omitted.

Amirani discovered a transcript of his interview with the documentary makers, and enlists Oscar-nominated actor Ralph Fiennes to play the ex-spy in a re-enacted interview. "The actual running of the coup from our side was my responsibility," Fiennes recounts Darbyshire saying. Britain's Foreign Office did not respond to a request for comment.

Hopes and dreams

For Amirani, 59, making a film about Mossadegh's overthrow felt "as personal as it can get". "As a kid I lived through the consequences of the coup that gave rise to the shah's rule for 25 years," he said. His interest was piqued after seeing pictures of the long-deposed prime minister at pro-democracy protests in Iran in 2009. That resonated with a deeply-held sense that the country's recent history could have been radically different had Mossadegh remained in power. "He, for many including myself, presented the hopes and dreams of a democratic secular Iran," Amirani said.

During his decade-long quest to make "Coup 53", relations between Iran and the West deteriorated markedly, with a 2015 nuclear deal unravelling and rising military frictions in the region. Tensions between Tehran and London also increased due to the detention of several British-Iranian dual nationals and, more recently, the seizure of oil tankers by both sides. Amirani said he could feel history repeating itself.

"Everything that happened in '53 was unfolding in the news headlines during our editing," said Amirani. "The relevance of this film grew more and more the longer we spent making (it)," he added. "What the film can tell us is what (former US President) Harry Truman said: 'there is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.'" Amirani recounted.—AFP

Suon documentary tackles ghosts of genocides past

French-Cambodian filmmaker Guillaume Suon grew up haunted by the ghosts of his mother's past. It was her refusal to acknowledge them that led the 36-year-old to make the documentary "The Taste of Secrets", which made its world premiere at this week's 24th Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. "I wanted to look at what war leaves behind," said Suon of the film, which is in the running for BIFF's main Wide Angle documentary prize. "My mother never told me full stories, only pieces, and these haunted me, and my dreams."

Suon's film examines the notion of how survivors of genocide-and their families-deal with memories. It contrasts the story of his mother Eng, who escaped the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge in her homeland, with that of the French-Armenian photographer Antoine Agoudjian, who scours the Middle East as he documents mass killing while also tracing the memories of family members who survived the massacres of Armenians in Turkey in 1915.

One person wants to escape the ghosts of her past; the other is searching for ways to capture them through his images. "At first I was shooting these stories in parallel, but then I realized this is the same film," said Suon. Eng had escaped to a Thai refugee camp by the end of the 1970s, but family members travelling with her were killed along the way. They were among the up to two million estimated to have lost their lives during the Khmer Rouge's brutal reign, that lasted from 1975 to 1979. "When you witness an execution you can never forget it, even if you don't know the person," she says at one point.

Poignant scenes

But Eng is keen only to discuss what she witnessed in Cambodia when she is among fellow survivors-and even then only fleetingly. In some of the film's more poignant

scenes, we see Eng cooking at home in the south of France and reflecting, quietly, on how close she feels to her lost family when she uses recipes that have been passed down through the generations.

In the end she returns to Cambodia and, finally, talks more about her past. "I think she found some relief," said Suon. "My brother (Julien, the soundman on the film) and I found out more about who she is and who she was, and I think she started to feel that she was not alone with these memories anymore." Agoudjian, meanwhile, comes across as obsessed with the past and with coming to terms with the ghosts he says have followed his life.

Through numerous trips to the Middle East-including a harrowing one through Iraq with the filmmakers-he believes he has come closer to understanding the grief and guilt his family felt for being survivors of massacres estimated to have claimed up to 1.5 million lives. "The places he goes are like a nightmare," said Suon. "But this is his way, I think, of connecting with his family's past and what they experienced."

"For my mother, there is a different feeling. She told me that if you go out and try to find death, you lose. Death will never leave you then." Suon has previously won acclaim for "The Storm Makers", his look at the issue of human trafficking in Cambodia. He previously worked under the mentorship of Oscar-nominated director Rithy Panh ("The Missing Picture"), also a survivor of the Khmer Rouge and the driving force behind the country's Bophana film archive, while he champions the cause of young Cambodian filmmakers.

Many of them have been exploring similar themes to those traced by Suon, including this year's Oscar hope from Cambodia, director Caylee So's "In the Life of Music", which traces a romance that is haunted by the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. So-whose family fled the country when she was an infant-believes a current crop of emerging Cambodian filmmakers are collectively finding "new landscapes" when it comes to dealing with their homeland's recent and tragic past. "It such a big part of our lives and our history," said So. "We are finding that through film we can in some ways start to address some things that none of us can escape."—AFP



This undated handout photo shows documentary subject Eng Suon and her filmmaker son Guillaume Suon aboard a boat on their return to Cambodia during the shooting of 'The Taste of Secrets'. — AFP