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Iran: The Beginning of a Feminist Revolution

by Mats Radeck* and Avin Khodakarim**

For about four weeks, the people of Iran have been taking to the streets and were met by the extraordinary force of the Islamic regime. Often, these protests are dealt with in a limited way either called “hijab protests” solely demanding less strict clothing rules for women or brushed aside by Western media completely. However, the current protest movement deserves more attention considering that we are likely witnessing the beginning of a feminist revolution.

Background

- On September 16, Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a young Kurdish woman of 22 years died in police custody after having been arrested by the morality police in Tehran three days earlier for an alleged incorrect wearing of her hijab. The ministry of the interior announced an investigation of what Amnesty International called an “arbitrary arrest.”¹ Government voices claim Amini has died due to medical conditions. Her family denies these allegations.² The arrest of journalist Niloofer Hamed, known for publishing evidence from the hospital, underscores this.
- Amini’s death sparked protests all over the country starting in Amini’s hometown of Saqez, the capital of the Iranian province of Kurdistan. Many protestors carried pictures of Amini, took off their hijabs and cut their hair as acts of protest. Since mid-September, the protests have not died down, but instead sustained and grew. At least 201 people have been killed by security forces in the nationwide protests, with underreporting being likely.⁴
- The protests are notably organised and led by women.⁵ Although emphasising the message of women’s self-determination by, for instance, the popular slogan “women, life, freedom,” the protests extend beyond that and challenge the legitimacy of the regime as a whole.
- On September 21, the Iranian regime restricted internet access in the country after shocking images of the protests appeared on social media.⁶ The internet shutdown also targets media platforms like Instagram or WhatsApp hindering the flow of information between protestors, and between Iran and the rest of the world which impedes reporting and the organisation of protests. The restriction of internet access had been used to cover up protests by the Iranian regime in the past and has been serving as a tool for regime survival.⁷
- On September 30, security forces shot down protests in the Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan provinces in Southern Iran, killing at least 41 people. Iranian human rights groups have termed the incident “bloody Thursday” and accused the regime of crimes against humanity.⁸
- 70 percent of Iran’s population is under the age of 30 making students a significant part of the protests. Aimed at intimidation, students and staff members of the elite Sharif university in Teheran, as well as other universities, were attacked by security forces on campus starting on October 2.⁹ According to eyewitnesses, the police has also not refrained from using sharp ammunition. In rapid succession, the protests expanded to universities and high schools all over Iran.¹⁰
- Starting on October 9, security forces cracked down on the protests in the Kurdish-populated city of Sanandaj.¹¹ Using violence indiscriminately,¹² the police killed at least 5 people and injured more than 400.
- Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei played down the protests by calling them riots that have been orchestrated by external actors like the US and Israel.¹³ Iran’s leadership called for “decisive actions”.¹⁴ In an attempt to change the narrative of the protests, the regime has organised counter-protests exhibiting support for the theocratic establishment.¹⁵
- Several international governments have condemned the regime’s line of action. The EU and the US are expected to tighten their sanctions regime on Iran.¹⁶ In several cities across the world, people have protested to express their solidarity with the people in Iran.¹⁷

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Analysis

1. Apparent Similarities to Earlier Protests

Iran has a history of revolutions, protests and discontent. When assessing the recent protests, one might be reminded of the country's past. In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led a revolution from exile in Paris. Supported by Islamist and leftist factions, Khomeini ultimately managed to overthrow the autocratic rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and established himself as the Supreme leader of the country. Welcomed back in Tehran by cheering crowds, Khomeini initially spread hope for the country to overcome its history of political disappointment, shaped by disadvantageous concessions, repression, and economic distress. Yet, the theocratic regime he tried to establish created as many grievances and challenges. To consolidate the power of the Islamic establishment, the regime attempted to eliminate political dissidents. In a shocking practice of political cleansing, leftists, mujahideen, and neutral intellectuals were either killed, exiled or arrested. This process culminated in the mass executions of 1988 killing more than 3800 people.¹⁸ In a modified form, this practice of regime consolidation is still being followed today.

Throughout its history, the Islamic Republic has been ridden by discontent. Especially students and young people have repeatedly called for reform. In 1999, university students protested a decision to prohibit a reformist newspaper, yet the regime reacted with enormous force, a pattern of regime survival tactic which can be traced throughout Iran's history.¹⁹ Using militias, the authorities raided student dormitories and killed and arrested students. The protests extended beyond campus turning into the biggest popular challenge to the regime until then. The protests today are to a great extent carried by students as well, bringing back memories of 1999.

In 2009, the so-called Green Movement, also referred to as Persian Awakening in Western media grew into the biggest series of mass demonstrations in Iran until today. After opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was considered a reformer, lost the presidential election to the conservative hardliner Mahmood Ahmadinejad, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to express their discontent and call for a recount of votes. "Where is my vote?" was the motto of the Green Movement protests which blamed the elections fraudulent.²⁰ Similar to today's protests, the regime reacted by force and organised counter-demonstrations.²¹ Eventually, the movement, however, lost momentum.

Ten years later, a hike in the price of gasoline of up to 200% sparked renewed civil upheaval which soon challenged the regime as a whole. Besides the known patterns employed as a response, the regime shut down the internet for six days causing the flow of news about the protests to be disturbed.²² Further, internet platforms such as Facebook or Instagram are crucial for information gathering and protest organisations. The tactic is also employed in the recent protests leading to the scant availability of data.

Thus, the recent protests seem to exhibit similarities with former uprisings, both in narratives employed and regime responses. However, such a comparison is arguably a bit erroneous. The scope of the protestor's demands and several distinctive factors still differ.

2. Grievances Beyond Hijab Rules: What is Different in Today's Protests?

The recent protests exhibit some similarities with former big protest movements in Iran. However, these alleged similarities are, in general, overridden by the major differences that exist. First and foremost, while the people used to call for reforms to the country and the theocratic regime in earlier uprisings, the recent protests have turned into a question of survival. As often repeated, the protests are not only about relaxing hijab rules or demanding an independent investigation of Mahsa Amini's death. Chants like "Down with the Islamic Republic" are what is heard across Iran. The survival of the theocratic regime as a whole is at stake and the enormous vehemence of the protests has shown that its fall is high on the people's agenda.

Second, the protests can hardly be demographically classified. People of different ages and different social groups can be seen to have mobilised signalling broad solidarity between segments of society and a broad support base for the protests.²³ This includes wealthier segments that would have not taken to the streets in earlier protests about economic grievances.²⁴ Further, this protest is in great parts carried out by young Iranians, many of which have never experienced life under any regime else than the current one. Besides, different ethnic groups close ranks on the streets and university students are joined by workers and trade unions.²⁵ Especially the latter group holds great symbolic power reminding of the collective worker's actions that once helped to bring down the Shah in 1979.²⁶ Notable is the strike of workers in oil refineries,²⁷ posing a real challenge to the regime economically and symbolically.

Although garnering supported by a broad social base, the role women play in this movement is noteworthy.²⁸ From the beginning, women have been leading the protests marching in the first row of protest masses and being most vocal in their calls upon the regime. Especially in high schools and universities, the crucial role that women play in fuelling and sustaining these protests is easily observable. Besides their revolutionary nature, demanding fall of the theocratic regime, the protests are also of feminist nature, denouncing the structural oppression of women by a misogynist regime.²⁹

Third, the protests are intersectional countering various levels of discrimination. Especially Kurds and the Kurdish

question have moved to the epicentre of the protests.³⁰ Besides being a Sunni woman, Mahsa Amini was one of the 10 % of Kurds living in Iran, being called by her Kurdish first name Jina. The protests started in Saez on the day of her funeral and quickly spread to the whole of Iran. Yet, they have remained especially fierce within the Kurdish provinces in Northern Iran. The chant voiced by protesters: “women, life, freedom” once originated in the Kurdish independence movement and again highlights especially the centrality of Feminism and the Kurdish identity in the protests. It is arguably also the reason why the Iranian regime has been acting especially harsh in cracking down on the protests in the Kurdish region, including the massive use of live ammunition and drone attacks, as well as shelling of Kurdish homes, also in neighbouring Iraq.³¹ Hence, the death of Mahsa Amini has become a symbol of anti-Kurdish discrimination, the oppression of women, and the maltreatment of Sunnis by the Shi’ite regime, all together emphasizing the intersectionality of the movement.

Fourth, the protests have sparked solidarity worldwide.³² While earlier protests like the Green Movement have only set off sporadic rallies abroad, demonstrations can now be witnessed in many cities. Noteworthy is also the impact of social media. Whoever uses platforms like Instagram or Twitter currently can hardly get around videos, pictures and texts that are being shared about the situation in Iran, given that these make it past the strong internet control set up by the regime. Particularly, the Iranian diaspora is more networked than ever, fuelling the protests from abroad.³³ Needless to say, the social media sphere can only support, not replace protests.³⁴

Altogether, this demonstrates how the current protests in Iran are different from what the country has experienced before. Since former protests hardly provide comparativist value, it is pivotal to closely observe and analyse the movement.

3. Prospects for Iran: Survival of the Authoritarian Regime or a Feminist Revolution?

The situation in Iran is chaotic. With the internet having been massively restricted, analyses are difficult as information hardly manages to exit the country and comprehensive media coverage is missing. The latter is also due to the lack of press freedom in Iran in general.³⁵ However, much of the data that makes it out, can be found on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter where accounts like @1500tasvir share it.³⁶ By using first-hand video material of the protests, secondary sources, and drawing on theories of regime survival and protest movements, an impression of the bloody polarity that plays out between protestors and the Mullah regime on the streets of Iran can be inferred.

The response of the regime has been harsh. While the protest movement grows, the regime responds through two notable tactics: Strict state control of the narrative and coercion. First, the regime claims foreign forces to be responsible for the protests and the violence and, therefore, calls upon the people to maintain national unity and fight against the unrest.³⁷ This tactic also includes the organisation of counter-demonstrations aimed to signify the size of support that the Islamic regime enjoys.³⁸ However, this tactic has arguably failed. When President Raisi visited the Women's University Alzahara on October 8 to produce pictures of reconciliation and repeat the claim of foreign agents being responsible for the protests, women took off their hijab and chanted “murderer” in the direction of Raisi.³⁹ The narrative that the regime attempts to establish is hardly believed and therefore crumbles, showing how one of the major tactics of regime survival has failed.

Second, however, the regime has massive power of coercion at its disposal. Videos on social media serve as evidence of the violence that is leveraged to contain the protests. So far, this tactic has caused hundreds of deaths and certainly spreads fear. Aiming to end the protests, the regime has ratcheted the scope of its response using the full spectrum of coercion including lethal force, live ammunition, drones, rockets and torture. Such comprehensive coercion mechanisms have contained protests in the past in other countries and blighted revolutions. Also in Iran, coercion has supported regime survival.

Videos demonstrate how the regime uses both indiscriminate and selective violence. While indiscriminate violence can spread fear and raise protestors' inhibition threshold to join on the streets, selective violence is also used by the regime to, for example, hinder the protest movement to carve out leadership figures which would arguably heighten the chance of the protests to turn out successful. An example of this is the case of Shervin Hajipour, a singer who published a song based on “outpouring public anger.”⁴⁰ The song went viral and turned into an anthem of the protests. After his song hit 40 million views in less than two days, it was removed from Instagram and Hajipour was arrested and detained. The use of selective violence is nothing new in Iran and has been practised as a *modus operandi* for regime survival ever since.

The use of coercion is contingent on the support of the coercive institutions connected to the regime. With officers of the army pre-emptively refusing to use violence against protestors,⁴¹ and police officers seen joining protest marches,⁴² this support, however, can increasingly be questioned. Yet, these signs should not be overstated, considering that authoritarian regimes often secure themselves from internal coups through multiple coercive institutions. Similarly, the Iranian regime commands the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps intended to secure the survival of the Islamic regime.⁴³ If the military decided to close ranks with the protestors, bloody fights could follow of which the outcome is uncertain.

The incidents showcase how the regime's survival tactics are not fully working out to quickly and decisively contain the protests. Furthermore, the protestors still have at least three cards up their sleeve which will affect the protests' success. First, the protestors' collective action will likely reach a critical mass at which regime resistance

becomes increasingly difficult.⁴⁴ The fact that people risk their lives to stand up for their demands showcases the fundamental interests which the people have in the success of their protests. The heterogeneity and broadness of the support base even increase this effect on the collective action and raises the pressure exerted on the regime. This effect will likely increase in the future with more people jumping on the bandwagon as the likelihood of the overall success of the protest rises.

Furthermore, the protestor's tactics are promising and support the thesis of successful protests. These include, besides others, two things. Protestors thwart the regime's coercive capabilities by enticing the police away from certain protest sites. This is being done by attacking police stations directly which concentrates police forces at one site while being forced to neglect others.⁴⁵ Furthermore, with fast-moving tactics, the protestors manage to repel police forces and breach through police lines and, though unarmed, overwhelm the coercive apparatus of the state in parts.⁴⁶ Such tactics have shown to be key moments for the initially successful protest movements in the Egyptian Arab Spring.⁴⁷ A respective comparison thus increases the likelihood of success of protestors in Iran as well.

Moreover, international support is clearly on the side of the protestors who stand up towards an oppressive regime. Considering how international sanctions have already wracked havoc on Iran in the past,⁴⁸ the regime also puts its economic well-being at stake when increasing coercion against its people. While fighting on its domestic front against its people, pressure on the regime also increases from the diplomatic sphere.

An overview of the situation in the Iranian protests, therefore, gives an impression of imbalance with the protestors developing slight advantages over the regime forces, which will likely even increase in the future. Given the nature of the protests' support group and their demands, the movement is likely to become a feminist revolution about to heavily challenge the Islamic regime.

Conclusion

The Iranian people have now been taking to the streets for the fourth consecutive week and the protest against the Islamic regime is not seen to die down. While earlier protest movements, like the Green Movement, have still been asking for reform, the current protests have abandoned this approach and now demand systemic change including the abolishment of the regime in its current form. This factor is one of the differences which make today's protest movements distinct from earlier ones. Furthermore, especially the central role of women is noteworthy assigning the whole protest a feminist nature.

The regime is seen to respond with narratives of blaming external actors, as well as extraordinary force. However, the broad support base for the protests does neither allow believing the constructed accusations nor is it discouraged by the coercive tactic of the regime. This shows how the regime struggles to contain the protest movement.

Furthermore, the growing protests are likely to reach a critical mass soon, and the diverse civil society will address an increasingly weakened regime. The protestors' fast-moving tactics and their capability to push back police forces even increases the likelihood of success. Lastly, the protestors are backed by the international community which has the ability to weaken regime representatives economically.

The positive foresight sketched here is susceptible to being upended by the coercive capability of the revolutionary guard corps and their strong bonds to the regime. Furthermore, the protest movement still lacks leading figures to bundle ambitions. Yet, these risks do not totally preclude the possibility of the protests to turn into a revolution.

To support the protests in Iran, announcement of new sanctions can be an option for European governments and the European Union.⁴⁹ These should be targeted at regime representatives rather than general Iranian society. Those could include denial of entry to the EU for regime top officials, confiscation of their assets in European bank accounts. Furthermore, the EU could facilitate entry for ordinary Iranians and stop deportations to Iran. This way, the EU would show solidarity with the protestors and underline a serious stance against the brutality of the regime.

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