

Enforcing Islamic Attire on Women Sparks Protests in Iran

Is another Velvet Revolution in the Cards?

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Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the ruling clerics have strictly enforced the Islamic hijab on women in Iran. The clerics require women above puberty age to wear headscarves and avoid wearing tight clothing.

On September 13, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-years-old woman, was arrested by Morality Police (Gashte Ershad) presumably for not having proper Islamic attire. Mahsa, who lived in the city of Saqqez in the province of Kurdistan, had come to Tehran with her family.

Three days later, Mahsa who had gone to comma under suspicious circumstances while in police custody, was confirmed dead in a hospital. Her death has sparked wide protests against the Islamic regime across many cities in Iran. A series of demonstrations began on September 16 in the streets and universities in major cities in Iran and is ongoing.

The protests did not have any leaders. The protesters chanted, “mullahs must be lost,” and “death to the dictator.” Women in many cities protested by setting their headscarves on fire and cutting their hair in public. As of September 26, 2022, at least 40 persons had been killed. The protests are the largest since the protests over the increasing price of gasoline in November 2019, which were quelled by security forces and caused 1500 deaths, according to Reuters.

The protesters targeted the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the Islamic regime as a whole. Khamenei has been in the hot seat since 2021 when he engineered the presidential election to make his protégé Ebrahim Raisi president. In mid-September, Khamenei canceled all his meetings and public appearance due to illness as was reported by New York Times. He has contemplated for some time placing his son Mojtaba Khamenei as his successor, but Mojtaba is not favored by the people of Iran. The regime has tried to promote its ideology by incorporating religious and superstitious ideas into the schools’ curricula to

indoctrinate students. This has led to wide criticism from teachers. Furthermore, the regime subsidizes pilgrimage to Mecca and Shia imams' shrines in Iraq to fortify its Shi'a ideology throughout the region. This year the regime supported millions of Iranians to travel to Karbala to observe September 17, the 40-days anniversary (Arbaeen) Of the death of Hossein ibn Ali, the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, about 1400 years ago.

The Iranian Government Response

The government authorities said the protesters violated the norm of civil disobedience, and it deployed a large security force and plain clothes Basij forces to quell the protesters. The protesters were beaten by batons and dispersed by teargas and water cannon. Some protesters confronted the Basij and set on fire their cars and motorcycles. The security authorities arrested a number of political activists and journalists. Also, for security reasons, the government slowed the internet speed, and access to WhatsApp and Instagram was restricted to prevent further spread of the protests. In response, the US Department of Treasury exempted sanctions and let internet providers expand the range of internet services to Iranians.

On September 23, the government brought its supporters into the streets. After Friday prayers, the pro-government crowd walked from Tehran university toward Azadi square. They condemned the insults to the Holy Qur'an, burning of mosques, and desecrating of the veil of Moslem women in Iran. Further demonstration by the pro-regime crowd took place on September 25 (3 Mehr). The demonstrators gathered in Revolution Square in Tehran, protesting against the rioters. Similar crowds also gathered in other major cities.

Kayhan, a widely circulated pro-Khamenei newspaper, wrote the faithful people of Iran rose up against the oppressors and the rioters. The paper wrote that reformists and some celebrities who had supported the protesters are the lackey of the United States who must be brought to justice. The paper claimed Iran's progress in Shanghai Cooperation Organization membership and neutralization of the United States sanctions have made the Iranian enemies miserable.

In the past few decades, the Western powers had publicly criticized the ruling clerics in Tehran while tacitly supporting them to remain in power. Since president Raisii has come into office, this has changed course as Tehran has warmed up relations with China and Russia. The West is willing to loosen sanctions to let Iranian oil flow into the world market to reduce oil prices. However, Iran has not conceded to the West's demands on its nuclear program.

Is another Velvet Revolution in the Cards?

It is hard to speculate whether the current protests are the consequence of Mahsa Amini's death or they had been pre-planned to launch a velvet revolution. The Iranian authorities have stated that the protests were instigated by anti-revolutionary groups from abroad. They blamed the riots on foreign-based Persian language media outlets such as Iran International, a television station based in London and staffed by a group of Iranian journalists. Tehran has said the station is financed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Also, the government authorities blamed the Persian BBC of the British government and the Iranian exiled group Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) for the instigations. On September 25, Iran's Foreign Ministry said it summoned Britain's ambassador Simon Shercliff, to protest

what it described as a hostile atmosphere created by the London-based Farsi language media outlets. The ministry complained that the Persian news outlets had provoked disturbances and riots.

In the past few days' demonstrations, many MEK members were seen in New York, London, Paris, and Frankfurt who were waving their leaders' pictures among the other protesters. MEK does not have supporters in Iran, and its members are considered mercenaries who are serving the US interests.

MEK was previously based in Iraq and also had a presence in France. The United States removed the MEK's terrorist designation in 2012. In recent years, some Republicans, including the former Bush and Trump administrations' officials, have openly embraced the group and have given speeches inside the organization camp. In 2014, the United States asked Albania to host the MEK.

Subsequently, Albania accepted some 3,000 members of the exiled group. Since then, Albania and Iran have had tense relations. Finally, on September 7, 2022, Albania cut diplomatic ties with Iran blaming Tehran for cyberattacks and asked Iranian diplomats to leave Albania within 24 hours.[\[1\]](#) It is not known whether the Iranian government obtained any information about future operations of the group by hacking the websites in Albania. In the meantime, the media inside Iran revealed that there were about 8 million tweets with Mahsa Amini's hashtag on Twitter from abroad, which included 4 million from Israel, 2 million from Saudi Arabia, and nearly 2 million from Albania.

Dream of Balkanization

Tehran feels the Western powers may take advantage of the recent riots to fan the flame of the Kurdish uprising. The Western powers and their regional allies want to radicalize the Kurds in northwest Iran, which is bordered by Iraq and Turkey, to advocate autonomous self-rule, which is wishful thinking for the balkanization of Iran. Even though the Kurds are mostly secular and Sunni and oppose the theocratic government ruled by the Shia clerics, they are genuine Iranians and spread in several other regions in Iran. Incidentally, on September 25, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that after the entry of Komala's armed groups towards Iran's border towns for creating chaos, the ground forces of IRGC attacked the group's headquarters in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Komala is a secular Kurdish party engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Iranian government. The Guard said these groups are linked to global arrogance.

Have the Iranian Women Won?

It appears the Iranian women have been successful in challenging the clerics' enforcement of the hijab, as almost no officials in the regime talked about continuing to enforce the clerical guidelines on women's attire. The fact is that enforcing the Islamic hijab in Iran is a form of violence against Iranian women, and the Morality Police must be abolished. Though the regime may abolish Morality Police, the protests are against the theocratic regime and may come back in another form. While foreign agents may have been at work to instigate the protesters, the ruling clerics' repression and imposition of their religious ideology in the education curricula and people's lives have created the potential for more protests.

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Note

[1]

<https://www.reuters.com/world/albania-cuts-iran-ties-orders-diplomats-go-after-cyber-attack-pm-says-2022-09-07/>

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