

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF THE WOMEN, BY THE WOMEN, FOR THE PEOPLE

How decades of women-led protest could bring a violent misogynist regime to its knees

A POLICY PAPER BY HALEH ESFANDIARI

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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

The last forty years and the events of the last three weeks have shown that the Islamic Republic of Iran is incapable of reform, let alone fundamental change. The regime has turned a deaf ear to the condemnation by Europe and the United States of the violence the regime is inflicting on its people. It is ignoring the call for change by its own citizens. Women have not only been the chief targets of the regime's systemic culture of violent misogyny; they have also been central to laying the groundwork for change through consistent silent and open protest.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATION.

Western and other governments—as well as international organisations—must continue to condemn the current behaviour of the Iranian regime. They should call on the Iranian government to release the prisoners and repeat these messages at all international meetings that Iran's official representatives attend. They can also take practical measures: to facilitate access to social media and the internet to Iran's people wherever possible and to facilitate visas for Iranians who wish to leave Iran for the time being. Finally, acknowledging and supporting the important role that women can and do play in challenging violent misogynist systems will give credence to the fact that solidarity with Iran's protesters has been built on the backs of generations of women activists.

A NEW IRANIAN GENERATION OF WOMEN RISING

The revolution of the women in Iran is entering its third week, and women continue to be at the forefront of protests that have swept the country after a young woman died in police custody following her arrest for violating the hijab, or Islamic dress code. Despite the massive presence of security forces on the streets, more and more women from all walks of life have joined the protests—and without the hijab—in open defiance of the authorities.

The majority of these women have been young—in their twenties and thirties—and of the generation that was born into and grew up under the Islamic Republic. They are in rebellion against a regime that has delegated women to the status of second-class citizens, interfered in their public and private lives, deprived them of all the rights they had gained before the Islamic revolution, and does not tolerate dissent by women or anyone else. They have been joined by young men of the same generation who have supported their call for ‘Woman, Freedom, Life,’ and ‘Justice, Liberty, Voluntary hijab.’

These women and men want an end to clerical and dictatorial rule, and to being treated as pariahs in the world because they are citizens of Iran. They want an end to official corruption, to discrimination against women and minorities, to unemployment, poverty, hunger, and economic disadvantage. In brief, a women’s revolution over the imposed Islamic dress code has evolved into a much broader demand: for the end of the current regime and for a more hopeful future.

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MAHSA AMINI—THE REVOLUTIONARY SPARK?

How did the revolution start? On 13 September, the morality police stopped a young woman, Mahsa Amini, outside a metro station in Tehran and accused her of violating hijab rules. Mahsa, born in the city of Saqqez in Iranian Kurdistan, was visiting her family in Tehran. Despite the pleading of her brother and other witnesses, she was forced into a police van. According to press reports, she was beaten and her head was

smashed against the wall, either in the van or later in the morality police headquarters. She fell unconscious and was rushed to a hospital where—according to a statement by the hospital—she arrived brain-dead. Doctors could not resuscitate her, and she was pronounced dead on 16 September.

This was not the first time that a person had died under custody in Iran. This time, however, news of Mahsa’s murder was

” *Women set an example by removing their headscarves in public, tossing their scarves into bonfires, and cutting off their hair on video for all to see* ”

circulated in social media. Despite attempts by security forces to prevent people from attending her brief funeral, a thousand people gathered at her grave. Within hours of her death, large demonstrations broke out in cities in Mahsa’s native Kurdistan and then quickly spread to Tehran and other cities and towns across the country.

There have been protest demonstrations in Iran against the government in the past, but the notable difference on this occasion was the leadership by women. Women set an example by removing their headscarves in public, tossing their scarves into bonfires, and in some cases cutting off their hair on video for all to see.

A LONG HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women have marched alongside men in protests since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979—with workers, government employees, teachers, and others—due to, inter alia, months’ delay in receiving their salaries, the high cost of living, factory closures, and rigged elections.

Women had been proud participants in the pre-revolution marches that brought down the monarchy. They had imagined that the revolution would lead to freedom, democracy, and an expansion of women's rights.

But that euphoria turned into bitterness once women discovered that instead of an expansion of rights the revolution resulted in a contraction; their rights reduced to a bare minimum.

” *Women came out into the streets for the first time when the mandatory hijab was proclaimed in 1980 and were then attacked by vigilantes* ”

After the revolution, women came out into the streets for the first time when the mandatory hijab was proclaimed in 1980. They were then attacked by vigilantes and shouted down by traditional women who preferred wearing the hijab. The slogan of the attackers was “either the veil or a beating.” Violation of the hijab became punishable by seventy lashes. Another shocker came when the newly established Islamic government suspended the Personal Status Law, known as the Family Protection Law. Overnight, women lost the right to seek a divorce, child custody was denied to the mother after her children reached a certain age, and the age of marriage for girls was reduced from eighteen to nine.

A husband could stop his wife from working; polygamy once again became legal. Family courts were closed, and women could no longer serve as judges. Elementary and secondary classes were segregated, and no female teacher was allowed to teach boys and no male teacher allowed to teach in a girls' school. A number of fields at universities were barred to women students; men and women had to sit in separate sections in university classrooms; and they were not allowed to mix and mingle. Many women were either dismissed from their government jobs or forced into early retirement. But women continued to have the right to vote and be elected to parliament in the new state.

” *In four decades under the Islamic Republic, it was women who pushed for change - a tale of two steps forward, one step back* ”

Only in one area did the Islamic Republic treat women and men with total equality—executions: the death sentence was generously handed out to both men and women. It didn’t take long for women to

take matters into their own hands. In four decades under the Islamic Republic, it was women who pushed for change, for their rights, and for equality under the law.

It has been a tale of two steps forward, one step back. When a relatively ‘moderate’ president led the government, women experienced some reprieve from restrictions and interference; when a conservative president was in office, once again women were under attack. For example, under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) women felt freer to wear the veil more loosely, to wear tighter-fitting clothes, or to use lipstick and nail-polish without being harassed. In stark contrast, the current president, Ebrahim Raisi, ordered the morality police into the streets to ensure the mandatory hijab is strictly observed.

THE END OF IRAN AS WE KNOW IT?

Ironically, it was a hard-line president, targeting women, who lit the spark for the current rebellion against government repression. The government’s response to this newest round of protests and demonstrations has been harsh, with security forces using water cannons, tear gas, live ammunition, arrests, and imprisonment against the protestors. Women, obviously, have not been spared; and many have been shot and a number killed by the riot police. Several women journalists and civil society activists, picked up by the security agencies,

have not been heard from since. But public anger has been further aroused, and there have been no abatement of public protests.

On the contrary: more prominent figures—artists, academics, athletes, and even clerical students in seminaries in Tehran and the two shrine cities of Qom and Mashhad—have stated their anger at what was happening on the streets. Former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has been under house arrest for the last ten years, called for an end to the killing and reminded the security forces and the Revolutionary Guards, the paramilitary Basij forces, and the army that their duty was to protect the country and the people; not to shoot them. The protests have gained support and sympathy around the world, including in the US, the EU, and Latin America. Many other governments and prominent individuals have called on the Iranian regime to respect the human rights of its citizens and stop the killing of the protestors. Those who are taking to the streets have the full support of the Iranian diaspora whose members have been demonstrating and lobbying for them. Despite all these efforts, the life of the protestors continues to be in danger.

The government chose, unconvincingly, to point its finger at Israel and the United States, and their agents, as the drivers of the violent protest movement. Iran’s rulers could have chosen a different course. The government could have defused the anger of the people by acknowledging that the morality police were responsible for Mahsa Amini’s death. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Raisi could have attempted a conciliatory tone rather than threatening the young people on the streets with further punishment and praising the police and the security forces. They could have barred the riot police from firing at and killing the protestors and from assaults on peaceful demonstrations on university campuses. They did none of these things. Rather, they’ve hunkered down and relied, once again, on force.

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SUPPORTING THE UNBROKEN SPIRIT OF IRAN'S WOMEN

It is incumbent on governments around the world and the international community to condemn the actions of the Iranian regime, to demand the release of the prisoners, and to repeat these messages at all international meetings that Iran's official representatives attend. National and international actors can also take practical measures: to facilitate access to social media and the internet to Iran's people wherever possible, and to facilitate visas for Iranians who wish to leave Iran for the time being.

Finally, acknowledging and supporting the important role that women can and do play in challenging violent misogynist systems will give credence to the fact that

” *The Iranian women have lit a bonfire which cannot be extinguished* ”

solidarity with Iran's protesters has been built on the backs of generations of women activists. The security forces may in the end succeed in crushing the current protest movement. But among the people the bitter taste of the clampdown will remain.

The Iranian women have lit a bonfire which cannot be extinguished by water cannons, live ammunition, arrests, long prison sentences, torture, and executions. The women, and a restless people, will be back on the streets in a renewed fight for their rights and freedom.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.

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