

ANTI-HIJAB PROTESTS OVER MAHSA AMINI'S DEATH

Challenging the essence of Iranian regime

For the ruling clergy, the anti-hijab campaigns strike at the heart of the ideology that validates arbitrary and unaccountable power in Iran. To question hijab is to question the essence of the Islamic Republic.

INTERNATIONAL DESK

More than three weeks of protests have rocked Iran after a young woman died after being detained by the country's so-called morality police.

The 22-year-old Mahsa Amini had travelled to Tehran with family from the northwestern Kurdistan province when she was detained for what the police deemed to be "immodest clothing" on September 13.

Authorities claimed that she had a heart attack while staying in a "guidance centre" – a type of re-education centre where women are taught how to follow Iran's rules on female clothing. Her family has alleged that officers beat her head with a baton and banged her head against one of their vehicles.

She was declared dead on September 16 by state television after having spent three days in a coma. Iranians took to the streets across the country, calling for justice for Amini, angry at the authorities and morality police, who they blame for her death.



Iranian students pictured in the Seventies.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



During the period from 1975 to 1980, the Chador or Burqa was used as a symbol of resistance against the Shah's regime.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

The history of hijab in Iran

INTERNATIONAL DESK

This is not the first time when a woman has been assaulted in Iran for not wearing a hijab properly. Many such cases have come to light, while many still are unreported. Women in Iran have been protesting against these cruelties, for a long time. But it was always not the case. Women in Iran have also donned hijab as a symbol of resistance against oppression, monarchy.

REZA SHAH AND MODERNIZATION OF IRAN



At the end of the 19th century landowners, merchants, intellectuals and Shia clerics had a significant influence on Iranian society. They came together in the constitutional revolution but failed to overthrow the Qajar regime.

However, this revolution led to the rise of General Reza Khan, the commander of the elite Persian Cossack Brigade (also the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty). In 1925, with the help of the United Kingdom, he came into power and established a constitutional monarchy.

Reza Shah was heavily influenced by the UK and USA. Years after reigning in Iran, he introduced a lot of social, economic, and political reforms. He replaced Islamic laws with the western laws of modern times.

He put a ban on Islamic clothing, separation of the sexes, and veiling of women's faces with hijab or burqa. Reza Shah was so committed towards these reforms that in 1936, he implemented Kashf-e-Hijab.

That is, if a woman wears a hijab, the police have the right to remove it. Behind all this reform, his major aim was to weaken the influence of conservatives in society, who collectively supported the traditional belief system.

The shah regarded Iranian hijab and traditional costumes as a sign of 'backwardness', and tried also to compel men to wear what he regarded as 'western' costumes and hats.

The religious establishment which saw, and still sees, the unveiling of women as a blow to its values and power, strongly opposed the decree and Reza Shah's other attempts at modernization.

Implementation of the ban eased, and many women went back to traditional ways of dressing when Reza Shah went into exile in 1941 due to his German sympathies and under British pressure for the succession of his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

He was also greatly influenced by western culture. For aggressive modernisation of the country, he launched the 'White Revolution' in 1963 giving women the right to vote. In 1967, Iran's personal law was also reformed in which women got equal rights. The age of marriage for girls was also raised from 13 to 18 years and abortion was also made legal.

In the last few years before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, wearing headscarves became popular among those in the younger generation who often saw it as a means to express their political opposition to the monarchy and its westernisation of the Iranian society.



Iranian women with traditional chador veils before the hijab ban.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

RISE OF CONSERVATIVES AND ISLAMIC LAW

Shia religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini opposed these policies of Shah. He became a prominent face in opposition to the White Revolution in 1963. He was arrested two times and sent into exile for 15 years.

The collapse of the economy paved way for dissent.

Away from the public view, Khomeini preached the idea of the Islamic Republic, sharia law, and the idea of an Islamic government through books and cassettes. In 1978, under his leadership, two million people gathered at Shahyad Chowk, in Tehran to protest against Shah. Interestingly, women in large numbers also took an active part in this revolution.

In 1979, fearing execution, Reza Pahlavi fled the country and Iran became the Islamic Republic. Khomeini was made the Supreme Leader of Iran.

Women's rights were plundered at the onset of the Khomeini regime. In 1981, the use of cosmetic products was banned, and in 1983 wearing the hijab became mandatory. The Islamic government abolished the reforms of the Family Protection Law of 1967 and the age of marriage for girls was reduced from 18 years to 9 years.



A woman cuts her hair during a protest against the Islamic regime of Iran in New York City, New York, US, September 27, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS

publicly cut their hair as furious crowds called for the fall of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Under a law adopted in 1983, four years after Iran's Islamic revolution, all women, regardless of faith or nationality, must conceal their hair with a headscarf in public and wear loose fitting trousers under their coats. Violators face public rebuke, fines or arrest.

But decades after the revolution, clerical rulers still struggle to enforce the law, with many women of all ages and backgrounds wearing tight-fitting, thigh-length coats and brightly coloured scarves pushed back to expose plenty of hair.

While that defiance is common, the nationwide protests have raised the stakes as Iranian women call for more freedoms.

In the first few days, Iranian media criticized the so called morality police. The day after her funeral, nearly all Iranian press dedicated their front pages to her story.

Reformist political parties, and even



An Iranian pro-government woman holds the Iranian flag during a rally against the ongoing protests in Tehran, Iran September 23, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS

influential clerics called on the government to listen to the people.

However, that reformist tone has changed notably as protests spread. Presumably, under strict pressure from the regime, the media has projected the protests as an assault against religious values.

Waves of the hijab protests have hit the clerical establishment in the past years. In 2014, rights activist Masih Alinejad started a Facebook campaign 'My Stealthy Freedom', where she shared pictures of unveiled Iranian women sent to her. Her movement was followed in 2017 by a hashtag campaign encouraging women to wear white scarves on Wednesdays to protest laws requiring hijab.

And in the months and years that followed, new photos and videos and stories of women removing their hijab or resisting the morality police flooded social media.

Veiling in Muslim societies has always been heavily contingent on geographic, socioeconomic, and historical context, and in contemporary Iran, the issue has long been politicised. In 1936, the first Pahlavi shah issued a decree that prohibited veiling in a bid to modernise his country.

The edict lapsed a few years later, when the shah was forced into exile and his young

son took the helm. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi doubled down on his father's secular, pro-Western orientation, and in the 1970s, as anti-government activism gained momentum, many women consciously adopted headscarves or all-enveloping chadors as tangible rejections of the monarchy.

Still, even from the start of the post-revolutionary era, the efforts by the state to impose and enforce hijab provoked intense resistance. In the weeks after the monarchy was toppled, hints of a crackdown on women's dress prompted some of the first protests of the post-revolutionary era, drawing thousands of women to the streets in March 1979 to warn that the imposition of headscarves by the new leadership threatened their rights.

But the activism against hijab was also controversial from the start.

In a country where women require a man's approval for travel and marriage, where laws surrounding divorce and custody and inheritance favour men, and where female labour force participation is among the lowest in the world despite high educational attainments, it's understandable that some downplay the significance of hijab as secondary to other matters such as political or gender equality rights.

But the issue that most of us fail to understand is, for Iranian women, this whole hijab decision is imposed on them. For them, banning the hijab was imposed, so was the imposition of mandatory hijab. For them, it's not about the clothes, it's about the coercion.

According to one independent study from 2020, 72 percent of Iranians are against mandatory hijab-wearing. By contrast, only 15 percent support it.

QUESTIONING THE ESSENCE OF REGIME

For the ruling clergy, the anti-hijab campaigns strike at the heart of the ideology that validates arbitrary and unaccountable power in Iran. To question hijab is to question the essence of the Islamic Republic, and to express those questions in a way that demonstrates impatience with the perennial assurances of "peaceful reform" confounds the deeply-held political narratives of many, both inside and outside Iran.

Among the regime's senior leadership, mandatory hijab-wearing has become a nonnegotiable litmus test for anyone who professes loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Once mandatory hijab-wearing is challenged and potentially revoked, the thinking goes, opponents will simply move on to contest the regime's other cherished policies.

Whether this ongoing protest can generate durable policy change, or even regime change, is hardly certain. Tehran has massive repressive capacity at its disposal that extends well into the online space.

Iran was rocked by unrest in 2017 and 2018. In 2019, Iran said 200,000 people took part in what may have been the biggest anti-government demonstration in the 43-year history of the Islamic Republic. Reuters reported 1,500 were killed by security forces.

All these protests were brutally suppressed.



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Iran Human Rights, a Norway-based group, has said at least 133 people have been killed by security forces so far. State media have reported that more than 40 people have died, including security personnel. Scores, including a number of journalists, students, lawyers and activists, have been arrested.

After remaining silent for three weeks, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Monday blamed the US, Israel and "some traitorous Iranians abroad" for the protests. He urged security forces to be ready for more.

The West has been vocal since the protests erupted. The US has already imposed sanctions on Iran's morality police, and President Joe Biden said that this week his administration would "impose further costs" on those perpetrating violence against peaceful protesters. A number of Western countries summoned Iranian envoys to lodge protest against the crackdown.

PROTESTS FLARE AT A DELICATE TIME

The protests come at a delicate time for the regime. Anger has been simmering in Iran as years of US-led sanctions have hobbled its economy. Widespread corruption and economic mismanagement also played a big part. And Tehran's hope of improving the situation seems unlikely as talks on restoring the nuclear accord seems to have collapsed after glimpses of progress.

The protests also come at a time when the world is going through a major geopolitical shift. Iran has been a vocal supporter of a new emerging bloc led by China-Russia, which is trying to pose a challenge to West's dominance.

Now, despite the harsh crackdown, the demonstrations have become widespread, with demands broadening to reflect ordinary Iranians' anger over their living conditions.

MANDATORY HIJAB AND PROTESTS

Amini's case has touched a raw nerve and unleashed years of pent up anger over the mandatory hijab.

In an unprecedented manner, Iranian women are challenging the country's Islamic dress code, waving and burning their veils. Some have

WEST'S MEDDLING IN IRAN

TOBACCO PROTEST (1891)

On 20 March 1890, the long-standing Iranian Qajar monarch Nasir al-Din Shah granted a concession to British Major GF Talbot for a full monopoly over the production, sale, and export of tobacco for 50 years. At the time, the Persian tobacco industry employed over 200,000 people, so the concession represented a major blow to Persian farmers and traders. The boycotts and protests against it were widespread and extensive as a result of cleric Mirza Hasan Shirazi's fatwa (judicial decree).

PERSIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION (1905-1911)

The growing dissatisfaction continued until the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament, and approval of the first constitution. Although the revolution was successful in weakening the autocracy of the Qajar regime, it failed to provide a powerful alternative government. Therefore, in the decades following the establishment of the new parliament, a number of critical events took place. The Shahs of Persia were backed by foreign powers against the parliament.

REZA SHAH (1921-1935)

Insecurity and chaos created after the

Constitutional Revolution led to the rise of General Reza Khan, the commander of the elite Persian Cossack Brigade who seized power, with the help of UK, in a coup d'état in February 1921. He established a constitutional monarchy, deposing the last Qajar Shah, Ahmed Shah, in 1925 and being designated monarch by the National Assembly, to be known thenceforth as Reza Shah, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty.

IRANIAN COUP D'ÉTAT (1953)

In 1941, an invasion of allied British and Soviet troops deposed Reza Shah, who was considered friendly to Nazi Germany, and installed his son, Mohammad Reza

Pahlavi as Shah. From 1901 on, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, owned by Britain, enjoyed a monopoly on sale and production of Iranian oil. It was the most profitable British business in the world. In 1953, following the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry by the democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, American and British forces instituted a highly effective embargo of Iranian oil, and covertly destabilized the legislature and helped return control to their ally, Pahlavi. The American 'Operation Ajax', orchestrated by the CIA, was aided by the British MI6 in organizing a military coup d'état to oust Mossadegh on August 19.