

Iran's struggles under repression and foreign intervention

THE OVERTON WINDOW

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country from international scrutiny."

Yet verified videos and credible eyewitness accounts from Iran point to mass killings committed on an unprecedented scale, according to Amnesty International. Its secretary general, Agnes Callamard, stated, "The international community must take urgent diplomatic action to protect protesters from further massacres and confront the impunity driving the state's campaign of bloodshed."

Western leaders have strongly condemned the actions of the Iranian regime. US President Donald Trump has issued varying degrees of threats and has recently stated, "It's time to look for new leadership in Iran." But Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a speech on Thursday, blamed the US for the death toll and repeatedly claimed that US and Israeli agents were responsible for the unrest.

While the Iranian regime has a long history of crushing dissent independent of foreign interference, these claims may not be entirely unwarranted. For example, according to *The Jerusalem Post*, towards the end of December last year, the Mossad used its Farsi-language Twitter account to encourage Iranians to protest against the regime, stating that it would join them during demonstrations. The post read: "We are with you. Not only from a distance and verbally. We are with you in the field."

Given Mossad's deep infiltration of Iran, as demonstrated by the shocking killings of senior Iranian generals in 2025, it is not implausible that such operations continue to this day. Former CIA Director Mike Pompeo, known for his hawkish stance against Iran in particular, tweeted: "Happy New Year to every

Iranian in the streets. Also, to every Mossad agent walking beside them..."

Meanwhile, Western media coverage has largely overlooked the massive rallies supporting the Iranian government, which in some cases appear to dwarf anti-regime demonstrations. This is not to suggest that the Iranian government's violent response is justified, nor should it diminish the profound

(particularly US) intervention persists, the dire economic conditions that first ignited unrest in the closing days of 2025 have only worsened.

Even so, it is widely understood that US sanctions and Western economic manoeuvring have slowly strangled Iran's economy, one of many ways in which confrontation with Iran has advanced over

The Iranian regime's fears mean that human rights abuses within the country, which unquestionably deserve condemnation and investigation, stand little chance of resolution so long as the leadership remains convinced that invasion or total annihilation is imminent. That fear, regardless of political bias, is not without justification.

Where there are great powers at work, not just shadowy conspiracies and intelligence agencies, but enormous cultural, industrial, and corporate networks that interact, the push forcing governments towards a particular direction is enormous. This dynamic was most starkly illustrated during recent events in Venezuela, including the bombing of its capital and the abduction of its former president and his wife.

Following those events, the US president openly claimed that his country now controlled 55 percent of the world's oil, with analysts noting that the move significantly strengthened Washington's strategic advantage over China.

The same logic applies to Iran. Should the US succeed in achieving regime change in Iran, a goal it has pursued for decades, it would deal a significant blow to both Russia and China. It would halt China's access to Iranian oil and, at the very least, derail China's Belt and Road Initiative, of which Iran is one of the most important pieces. It would also help Israel achieve one of its most vehemently pursued strategic objectives.

While recent troop movements and betting market signals suggested that the US might strike Iran by the end of January, Trump's focus on Greenland has arguably pushed Iran down the priority list. However, some analysts argue that another push against Iran is not a matter of "if" but "when."

In any case, for the people of Iran, the most likely outlook seems to remain "lose-lose." Whether they can achieve freedom, economic stability, and safety without the intervention of foreign "saviours," or without being caught up in "underhanded geopolitical machinations," remains uncertain. For now, however, it appears unlikely.



Iranian demonstrators gather in a street during a protest over the collapse of the currency's value, in Tehran, Iran, on January 8, 2026.

PHOTO: REUTERS

hardships and sufferings faced by the Iranian people—conditions that are widely believed to have sparked the protests on December 28.

The collapse of the Iranian rial and soaring prices initially prompted protests by shopkeepers in Tehran, before demonstrations against Iran's clerical rulers spread nationwide. While protesters may have been mostly silenced by now, their grievances remain unresolved. And as the risk of foreign

Iran is surrounded by at least 45 hostile military bases on all sides. That produces an atmosphere of intense fear in which the country's leadership perceives itself to be in a state of constant war. Historically, such conditions have often led regimes to adopt illogical methods of suppressing dissent, as seen, for example, in Britain's imprisonment of Bertrand Russell during World War I.

As protests in Iran show signs of waning under the weight of an increasingly brutal crackdown, Iranian officials have claimed that at least 5,000 people, including around 500 security personnel, have been killed nationwide. Yet both casualty figures and arrest totals vary widely across sources, underscoring the opacity surrounding the unrest. The US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the monitoring group most widely cited by news organisations worldwide, estimates that more than 24,000 people have been arrested.

However, independent verification of these claims has become even more difficult following a near-total nationwide internet shutdown imposed on January 8, which has deepened the information blackout surrounding the protests.

In the days leading up to the shutdown, journalists and media workers inside Iran reported increasing pressure from authorities, including warnings, intimidation, and summonses, to refrain from covering events. Independent journalists faced restrictions on internet access and disruptions to mobile data—measures that had already constrained their ability to contact sources, verify developments, and publish for domestic and international audiences. Once internet access was cut entirely, even the restricted flow of information stopped.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) condemned the move as "a blatant assault on press freedom." Its regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, Sara Qudah, remarked, "By cutting connectivity, authorities are preventing journalists from documenting events and isolating the

people—conditions that are widely believed to have sparked the protests on December 28.

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How patriarchy continues to limit women's political role



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Women were at the forefront of the July 2024 uprising, but in the subsequently formed political structures, insecurity and social backlash gradually pushed them aside. Female students from universities across the country, including Dhaka University, were not only leading participants in the uprising, but they also became victims of attacks and lawsuits by law enforcement agencies. However, the number of female candidates in the post-uprising Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) election remained limited, and those who did contest faced extensive cyberbullying.

There were only 62 female candidates in the DUCSU election, accounting for merely 13 percent of the total candidates, even though 48 percent of DUCSU's voters are female students.

Women's participation in the Liberation War of 1971 was similarly undervalued in the post-war era. The title *Birangana*, rather than honouring their contributions, foregrounded the trauma and humiliation they had endured, while obscuring the critical roles they had played on the frontlines. This reflects a long-standing social failure to recognise women's agency, a problem that persists to this day.

Although women participants of the uprising were subjected to humiliation by members of Chhatra League during July-August 2024, in the post-uprising political climate, they faced widespread cyberbullying. In fact, nearly all female DUCSU candidates reported experiencing online harassment during their campaigns. One woman who filed a petition challenging the candidacy of a Shibir-backed GS nominee received threats of "gang rape." When the issue of women's harassment arises, political parties across ideological divides often appear united in their silence. The cyberbullying faced by female leaders and candidates during and

after the uprising was not merely personal abuse; it was a direct form of gender policing.

Khadijatul Kubra, who was arrested and imprisoned under the controversial Digital Security Act during the previous regime, recently contested in the Jagannath University Central Students' Union election. Following the announcement of her candidacy, she publicly expressed deep frustration over the scale of cyberbullying she had encountered. In a Facebook post, she wrote, "Even after spending 15 months in prison under the Digital Security Act, I have not been as mentally disturbed as I have been in the past few days."

Most of the abuse directed at female candidates was vulgar, gender-based, and overtly sexist. The absence of accountability on social media, combined with the ease of operating through fake identities, has made perpetrators increasingly reckless. The dominant psychology driving these online attacks can be summed up in a familiar refrain: "Why enter politics as a woman? Stay at home." This narrative is a clear manifestation of gender policing, whereby society seeks to confine women to a prescribed role and behaviour. It is rooted in the perception of women as sexual objects rather than as political actors, reflecting an effort to deny women agency, legitimacy, and visibility in public spaces.

Last year, Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahman announced that if his party came to power, it would introduce a new work policy for women, allowing them to work five hours a day while being paid for eight. Although the proposal may appear women-friendly at first glance, if implemented, it has the potential to curtail women's careers. If men continue to work eight hours while women work five, men will inevitably accumulate more output, experience, and institutional capital, ultimately dominating

leadership and decision-making positions. Realistically, why would any institution reserve senior roles for individuals producing only a fraction of the required labour?

Such proposals are detached from socio-economic realities. Bangladesh's garment sector, driven primarily by women, continues to struggle with low wages and unsafe working conditions. In this context, providing eight hours' pay for five hours' work for millions of women is economically unsustainable.

This proposal—a structural restriction disguised as welfare—could very well confine women to the domestic sphere. This stands in contrast to feminist thinkers John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor's argument that economic participation outside the home is essential for women's emancipation.

But subconsciously, society has normalised the idea that women can be insulted and subjected to sexually suggestive remarks. Women in positions of power are systematically targeted in efforts to "clip their wings." As a result, even women in the upper echelons of society are not immune to humiliation. Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's personal grooming and private life were once criticised on the floor of parliament, in an unmistakable example of political misogyny. Although women's participation in government, political parties, and public administration has increased over the years, patriarchal impulses to undermine their authority persist.

The persistent salary disparity faced by the national women's football team is another manifestation of this structure. In this way, patriarchal systems create conditions in which women are routinely humiliated across cyberspace, workplaces, and social settings. Gender-based differentiation is also embedded in culture and language. Sufia Kamal, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Kamini Roy are routinely described as "female poets," while no male poet is ever labelled a "male poet." Such linguistic practices reinforce the notion that active women are exceptions rather than equals.

While some progress has been made in empowering women at higher levels, empowerment at the grassroots remains elusive. Even when women legally inherit property, social structures often

obstruct the realisation of that right. This gender-based structural disempowerment continues to limit women's freedom and security.

A number of steps must be taken to change the discrimination women face. First, the state must adopt effective policies to prevent violence and discrimination against women.

Second, schools and colleges should provide training on digital safety, responsible use of cyberspace, and gender studies for students of all genders. Establishing a dedicated cybersecurity agency and a cyber police helpdesk is also essential. Third, institutional protection of women's leadership in public administration

must be ensured for women to exercise independent decision-making.

Policy reform alone is insufficient; societal attitudes must also change. The role of the younger generation is crucial. By raising awareness in cyberspace and beyond, a strong social foundation for women's safety, freedom, and leadership must be built.

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বিদ্যুৎ, জাতীয় ও স্থানীয় সম্পদ মন্ত্রালয়ের বিদ্যুৎ বিভাগের আওতাধীন টেকসই ও নবায়নযোগ্য জাতীয় উন্নয়ন কর্তৃপক্ষ (স্রেডা)-এর বাজেটের গবেষণা অনুদান থাকে ব্যান্দকৃত অর্থের মাধ্যমে বাংলাদেশ টেকসই ও নবায়নযোগ্য জাতীয় উন্নয়ন ও সম্প্রসারণ প্রযোগিক গবেষণা প্রত্নাব আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে।

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শর্তাবলী

- ১। গবেষক/গবেষণা দলের সদস্যদের বাংলাদেশের স্থানীয় নাগরিক হতে হবে;
- ২। গবেষণাটি একক/প্রযোজনীয় কর্তৃপক্ষের স্থানীয় নাগরিক হতে হবে;
- ৩। গবেষণা প্রত্নাবের সাথে গবেষণাগ্রহের পূর্ণাঙ্গ জীবন বৃক্ষাত এবং অভিজ্ঞতা (যদি থাকে) দাখিল করতে হবে;
- ৪। গবেষণা প্রত্নাবের সাথে গবেষণাগ্রহের পূর্ণাঙ্গ জীবন বৃক্ষাত এবং অভিজ্ঞতা (যদি থাকে) দাখিল করতে হবে;
- ৫। চূড়ান্ত গবেষণা প্রতিবেদনসমূহ পর্যালোচনার উদ্দেশ্যে গবেষক/গবেষণক দলসমূহ তার/তারের অনুদানের অর্থ হতে স্বীকৃত করার প্রয়োজন করবেন;
- ৬। চূড়ান্তভাবে মনোনীত প্রতিবেদন গবেষণাগ্রহের ক্ষেত্রে সর্বোচ্চ অনুদানের পরিমাণ ৫০,০০০/- (পাঁচ লক্ষ) টাকা।
- ৭। চূড়ান্তভাবে মনোনীত গবেষণাগ্রহক দলকে আবশ্যিকভাবে একটি ব্যাংক হিসাবে খুলুতে হবে এবং উক্ত ব্যাংক হিসাবে গবেষণা অনুদান প্রদান করা হবে;
- ৮। গবেষণার স্বত দাক্তাবে স্বত প্রতিবেদন করতে হবে;
- ৯। গবেষণা অনুদান তিনি কিসিতে প্রদান করা যাবে;
- ১০। গবেষণার নির্ধারণ, গবেষণা পর্যালোচনাপূর্বক প্রাথমিক বাচাই, গবেষণার মধ্যে ও চূড়ান্ত প্রতিবেদন পর্যালোচনা ইত্যাদি বিষয়ে প্রযোজনীয়স্থানের সেমিনার/কর্মশালার বায় অর্থ বিভাগ কর্তৃপক্ষ আবুয়ায়া স্রেডা'র গবেষণা থাকে নির্বাচিত করা যাবে;
- ১১। আগ্রহী গবেষণাগ্রহক দলকে আগমনী ১৫ ফেব্রুয়ারি ২০২৬ তারিখের মধ্যে নিয়ন্ত্রান্তরকারী বারাবর গবেষণা প্রত্নাব দাখিল করেছেন, তারের গবেষণা প্রত্নাব কর্তৃপক্ষ মন্ত্রালয়ের জন্য বিবেচিত হতে হবে; একই বিষয়ে নতুনভাবে প্রত্নাব দাখিল করার প্রয়োজন নেই। তবে ইতোপৰি দাখিলকৃত প্রত্নাব সংশোধনপূর্ব নির্ধারিত সময়ের মধ্যে নতুনভাবে দাখিল করা যাবে;
- ১২। একই বিষয়ে কোন প্রত্নাব সরকারি বাস্তবাদের প্রতিষ্ঠানে দাখিল করা যাবে না অর্থাৎ বৈতাত পরিহার করতে হবে;
- ১৩। গবেষণা কার্যক্রম, মন্ত্রণালয়, ব্যবস্থা পরিমাণ ও প্রযোজনসমূহ উ