

Inside Iran: Less-known features of the Iranian protests – and corresponding governmental responses

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While the current Iranian protests have made headlines all over the world, massive popular protests in Iran are not new. In what ways do the current protests differ from previous ones, and what have been governmental responses to it other than violent suppression?



Protest in Tehran, Keshavarz Boulevard. Photo: Darafsh, via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Nature of the Protests

The Islamic Republic of Iran has experienced several uprisings throughout its near 44 years of existence: student protests in 1999, widespread demonstrations against the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, and popular protests against skyrocketing price inflation in 2018 and 2019. However, the latest unrest that has started on 16th September 2022 is different, and indeed unique, in ways that set it apart from the past.

Women-led – The protests were sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman on 16th September. Following her arrest by Iran’s notorious Morality Police for not wearing a hijab, Amini died two days later.

Mahsa Amini’s name became a hashtag that was used by millions on social media, often accompanying images of women standing defiantly on the front lines of public demonstrations. In an unprecedented and spontaneous manner, women set their headscarves on fire at rallies, marched and confronted security forces without a head covering, and cut their hair in symbolic defiance. Their voices chanting protest slogans can often be heard above those of men. The chant that has become defining and iconic is “Woman, Life, Liberty!”, and although the uprising has now morphed into broader anti-government protests, the oppression of women continues to play a central role.

Youth-centered – The most ardent demonstrations and acts of defiance during the current unrest have been committed by young women and teenage girls. University students in major cities (including Tehran, Shiraz, Gilan, Mazandaran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Kermanshah, Sanandaj) have held daily demonstrations and refused to attend classes. High school girls have walked out of their schools and demonstrated in the streets, often without their compulsory uniform headscarves. They have targeted the symbols of the Islamic Republic by tearing pictures of

Stricter enforcement

While Amini's death was clearly the catalyst for the current protests, another reason why these protests became so widespread is likely to be the stricter and more forceful enforcement of the obligatory hijab rule under Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi. Videos of Iranian women being violently arrested for not wearing the hijab went viral this year, including prior to the 16th of September.

the founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini and current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei from their textbooks or by removing their framed portraits from their classrooms and setting these on fire. Video clips of these actions have circulated widely on social media and Persian-language news services in the diaspora. Meanwhile, young men are also involved in the protests. On 16th October, Hossein Salami, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) stated that schools had become a central battleground against the Islamic Republic.



Over forty teenage protestors have been killed by Iranian police or security forces. Victims include 16-year-old girls Nika Shakarami and Sarina Esmaeilzadeh and a 16-year old boy named Nima Shafighdoust. Photo from [Amnesty International](#).

Regime change – Another key difference between earlier protests and the current ones are the repeated calls for the end of the Islamic Republic state. “Death to the Islamic Republic!” or “No to the Islamic Republic!” are heard ubiquitously alongside “Woman, Life, Freedom!” These anti-regime chants are uttered by protesters in the streets and by students in universities and schools. As the regime’s crackdown has become increasingly brutal, the slogans and graffiti are likewise adopting a more aggressive tone: “This is the final message. Our target is the regime.”. Or: “Don’t call it a remonstrations. It has become a revolution.”

Global solidarity – The “Women, Life, Freedom!” slogan and the universality of this message has received widespread support from women elsewhere in the world. For instance, women across the world, including celebrities such as Oscar-winning French actors Marion Cotillard and Juliette Binoche, cut off locks of their hair, in solidarity with Iranian women.

Coupled with the demand for a regime change, this movement has also brought together dissident Iranians from across the world, which has led to the largest protest by Iranians in the diaspora at any point over the last four decades. The demonstration for women’s rights and against the Iranian regime held in Berlin on 22nd October is a prime example, attracting over 80.000 people, mostly of Iranian background.

Slogans

While a wide range of slogans is being used by the protestors, most fall into one of the categories listed below:

- 1) Direct or indirect slogans against the regime: “Death to the Dictator!” or “Death to the Tyrant!”
- 2) Calls for solidarity: “Students and workers, we are in the trenches together!”, “From Kurdistan to Tehran, students are in prison.”
- 3) Slogans that voice the demands of the people: “Woman, Life, Freedom!”, “Referendum, referendum, the slogan of the people!”, “Bread, jobs, freedom, and voluntary hijab!”

The scope of the protests – The current uprising in Iran has received more societal support than any of the previous protests against the Iranian regime. The current protests have reached cities and places such as Kish Island, Qeshm Island, Parand and Saveh that did not participate in the civil demonstrations of 2009 or the economic protests of 2018 and 2019. At its peak, the 2022 demonstrations reached all 31 provinces of Iran and over 105 cities, a greater part of the country than any previous uprising.

Multi-ethnic – Mahsa Amini was born in the Western province of Kurdistan. The first protests upon her death occurred in her hometown of Saqez. The Islamic Republic regime responded by unleashing deadly attacks against its Kurdish population as well as on Kurds in neighbouring Iraq, accusing them of separatist intentions¹. Partially because of these attacks, Iranians from other ethnic minorities joined the protests as well like the Baloch and Turks, resulting in the demonstrations across the country taking on a multi-ethnic dimension. As well as Kurds, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targeted another repressed ethnic minority group: the Sunni Baloch who live predominantly in the province of Sistan and Balochestan.

As the crackdowns in Sanandaj and Zahedan have continued, both Persian Iranians in Tehran and Azeri Iranians² in Tabriz have taken to the streets using chants such as “The eyes and light of Iran are Sanandaj and Zahedan,”³ “From Zahedan to Tehran, I die for Iran”, “From Ahvaz to Tehran, I die for Iran”⁴. Also, video footage and reports from Iran show people in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan, donating blood for the wounded in Zahedan after a brutal attack by state forces October 5 to 6. As such, the protests aren’t just ethnically diverse in character, but have brought closer various ethnic groups in Iran.



Map of Iranian ethnic groups. Most ethnic minorities and groups are concentrated in specific areas and provinces. More specifically, this map uses dialects and main languages as an indicator for the ethnic group. Picture from [Basiri, A., et al. \(2020\)](#).

1 [New York Times](#), October 4, 2022.

2 Azeri Iranians are an ethnic minority, who live in West and East Azarbaijan and Ardabil. Their main language is Turkish.

3 [BBC Persian](#), October 13, 2022.

4 Not all of the ethnic minorities in Iran have joined the protests (e.g., Arabs, Lors, and Turks) or only very marginally. This in part due to their conservative stance and reservations against the woman’s rights component of this uprising. As such the protests are multi-ethnic in protests, but do not (yet) fully reflect Iran’s diverse population.

On 30th September 2022, the Iranian regime launched a brutal attack against protesters and bystanders in Zahedan by firing live ammunition, metal pellets and teargas, [killing at least 82 people, including children](#). Evidence gathered showed victims were shot in the head, heart, and the neck, indicating intent to kill. The government crackdown on Kurds has also been harsh, such as during protests on September 17th, October 10th, October 11th, and October 27th. Iran also fired missiles on Kurdish areas in Iraq, further intensifying the repression of protests in Iran's Kurdistan.

Means of Repression

As has been well-documented and been widely reported globally, Iranian authorities have cracked down on the street protests, including by killing and wounding protestors or by taking them into custody and applying those methods there. Altogether, 14,000 protestors are estimated to have been arrested, many of whom face the death penalty (numbers from UN, 3 November 2022).

The use of violence against (individual) protestors isn't the only way in which the Iranian government seeks to crush the protests, however. It also applies various other strategies that have received less (media) attention, including the following three tactics:

Internet blackout – The Iranian regime has cut off access to the internet and blocked the public's ability to communicate on widely-used messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Signal, Skype, and Instagram⁵. The restrictions have the dual effect of curtailing the ability of dissidents to connect and mobilize as well as preventing videos and images of the protests from reaching the outside world.

Forced confessions – State television has broadcast detainees accused of involvement in the unrest making self-incriminating statements⁶, which are widely suspected to be coerced. Also, relatives of underage protestors killed by security forces have described how they weren't just denied the right to examine their bodies before the burial but were also put under pressure to release false statements attributing the deaths to suicide or car accidents⁷.

False narratives – Security and safety concerns are frequently used by authoritarian regimes to justify their actions and retain support. Iran is no exception to do this rule. To discredit the demands of the protestors and to delegitimize their revolt against the state, the Iranian regime has propagated a narrative that protestors are "separatists" and "terrorists" or that their deaths were caused by these⁸. Meanwhile, the nationwide uprising is portrayed as a ploy of foreign governments, including Israel.

Spreading fear – Iranian authorities warn that the country could erupt into a civil war or be drawn into conflict with a competing regional powers, such as ISIS or an enemy state like Saudi Arabia or Israel. This message is amplified through reports in the state-run media that build an atmosphere of fear about war. The aim of this campaign is to warn Iranians that they risk losing the stability brought to them by the present regime and that the country might become a second Syria should the protestors gain the upper hand.

Analysis and Key Takeaways

At the heart of the current public revolt are demands for fundamental rights for all citizens and a conviction that the Islamic Republic is no longer reformable. Years of systematic suppression and discriminatory policies, especially towards marginalized groups such as women, have led to the public signaling more clearly and unitedly than ever before that they no longer want the Islamic Republic to rule over them.

5 [Global Voices](#), October 10, 2022.

6 Examples in [West Azarbaijan](#), [Zahedan](#), and [other parts of Iran](#).

7 [Amnesty International](#), October 13, 2022.

8 It was also under this guise that the Iranian government attacked Kurdistan – the Sunni-Kurdish home of Mahsa Amini – as well as Sistan and Balochestan province, which is, as mentioned earlier, populated mostly by Sunni Baloch.

Other forms of governmental violence

- There were allegations that female protestors were raped, before being killed.
- University campuses have been subjected to instances of brutal crackdown, with students at Sharif University in Tehran locked up and beaten up overnight.
- Police have entered houses where people could be heard chanting protest slogans using teargas and plastic bullets in the process.
- Authorities have reportedly demanded access to high school camera systems in order to identify and arrest dissident school children, after which these were sent to prison.

The acts of burning the hijab, breaking down dividers in university cafeterias that separate female and male students, and tearing down portraits of the founder and current leader of the Islamic Republic while shouting “Death to the Dictator!”, are the symbols of a revolt against the imposition of an Islamic way of life as defined by the regime. The protesters’ demand is for a different lifestyle, where they choose what they wear, how they socialize, and how they conduct themselves at work and school. They want to live inclusive public lives that see the reversal of the segregation of the genders in Iranian society. More importantly, they want the recognition of equal rights for women and minority groups by the laws and policies of the country. With women at the helm of this uprising, their mantra of “woman, life, freedom” encapsulates the universal demand for a life of choices and rights.

It hard to gauge to what extent the above-outlined propaganda of the Iranian government – alongside the violent suppression of the protests – will be able to influence public opinion. What does seem clear, however, is that for the protests to succeed, they need to spread to segments of society that have not been, or only very limitedly, involved so far. These include:

Older generations – The current movement is led by generation Z (born between 2000-2010) and young women. As the driving force of the protests, this group was able to mobilize women, teenagers, and youngsters across the country. Most of those who were arrested or killed are among this group as well. However, over 50% of the Iranian population is above 33 years old and have little to no role in the current civic movement⁹. Although many seem to sympathize with the protesters, they have not been involved in the protests yet. A bridge between this generation gap is required for a more sustainable and impactful civic movement.

Workers – Now in its eighth week, some oil workers have gone on strike in a petrochemical complex in southern Iran¹⁰ voicing support for the anti-government protests. Truck drivers across the country have also held strikes and a small number of merchants have closed their retail outlets and businesses in different cities. With inflation at over 50% and currency value increasingly plummeting, many workers cannot afford to join calls for an indefinite general strike¹¹. Therefore, the broad participation of Iran’s economic sector in the protests, which played a key role in securing the successfulness of the Islamic revolution of 1979, remains to be seen. Involving influential businesses and traditional markets (Bazaar) is instrumental for evolving the movement into a civic movement for all groups in society. For this, the provision of a public fund that supports those businesses is essential.

Civil society – Furthermore, Iranian civil society organizations have not been greatly involved in the civic movement. Organizations like the teacher association, independent worker unions, and NGOs are mostly quiet and observe. Although some organizations issue press releases in support of the protests, their involvement has been limited. However, given their capacity for coordination and organization their involvement could greatly contribute to the success of the protests.

All in all, the protestors and the Iranian government appear to be in a deadlock. Whether the protests can indeed lead to a new type of government in Iran, will depend on many factors, including the stance of the wider Iranian population as outlined above, the durability and sustainability of the protests and the willingness of the Iranian government to succumb to the most important demands of the protest movement.

9 [Tasnim News](#), November 18, 2020
10 [Wall Street Journal](#), October 10, 2022.
11 [The Economist](#), October 27, 2022

About us

Volunteer Activists (VA) is a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands. From 2001 to 2007, VA operated inside Iran as the largest capacity building organization in the country. From 2012, the VA team continued its activism from Amsterdam following security threats. Assisting Iranian CSOs through research-informed capacity building is one of the primary activities of VA. Other specialisations include: facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, advocacy and expansion of democracy and human rights and peace building - both within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.



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