

How Iran's Protests Differ from Past Movements

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The unrest has shown that many young people are not only rejecting the regime, but also steering away from long-time actors such as the clergy, reformers, and dissident politicians inside and outside the country.

Since erupting on September 16, Iran's latest wave of street protests has begun to pose a serious security and political challenge to the Islamic Republic, placing regime leaders in a uniquely puzzling situation.

Interestingly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has not commented on the turmoil, which was ignited by the torture and death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the regime's morality police (Gasht-e Ershad, or Guidance Patrol), reportedly for disrespecting regulations on wearing a hijab. Yet he and his circle are no doubt concerned about the movement's novel aspects.

Anti-regime protests are nothing new in the Islamic Republic. The largest one was sparked by massive fraud in the 2009 presidential election, bringing millions of people to the street until authorities cracked down on the movement's leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi (Mousavi is still under house arrest to this day). The most recent round of widespread protests took place in 2019, after the government's sudden decision to raise gasoline prices. At the time, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and police forces killed more than 1,500 people, a shocking record even by the regime's brutal standards.

The current uprising is distinguished by several notable features:

Unlike previous protests, the movement's chief source of discontent is neither economic nor an isolated political decision. The protesters' main slogan so far is "Women, Life, Freedom," indicating a more generalized and profound opposition to the Islamic Republic's entire totalitarian system. The regime's **comprehensive effort** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime->

control) to “Islamize” Iranian society and engineer all aspects of citizens’ lives has steadily deprived people of freedoms in the private and public sphere. Women have been subjected to the worst of these human rights violations, with their very bodies becoming Iran’s most crucial political battleground. Hence, human dignity and freedom lie at the heart of the movement’s current demands, centering on recognition of women as the primary victims of the regime’s patriarchal tradition and authoritarian Islamist ideology. This foundation could make the movement a particularly powerful humanistic, egalitarian, liberal, and secular force in Iran, with tremendous potential for spurring fundamental change.

The movement is not tied to the clergy at all. This is not to say it is an anti-religious movement—in fact, protesters have deliberately avoided the use of any religious symbols or rhetoric. Yet it is also conspicuously cleric-free. In the past, all influential political movements in Iran, from the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, have included high-level participation by clerics. Even the 2009 Green Movement had a cleric, Karrubi, as one of its two main leaders.

The absence of clergy in today’s movement is not accidental. Many protesters see all Shia clerics—not just key regime supporters, but also silent critics and neutral authorities—as the foundation of the regime’s legitimacy, facilitating its initial emergence and justifying its principles, policies, and decisions ever since. Clerics represent sharia, an inherently discriminatory legal system that claims divine authority to abuse human rights and, in particular, subjugate women. Hence, this class cannot share in the movement’s main objectives or worldview—in the eyes of the clergy, demanding equal rights for women is the ultimate existential threat to sharia and their status as its guardian. Even clerics who might oppose the regime on other grounds would not be able to publicly shout “Women, Life, Freedom.” The movement may therefore represent a watershed moment in the Shia clergy’s gradual divorce from the leading forces in Iranian society.

The emphasis on the veil is no coincidence. As a totalitarian regime, the Islamic Republic has been hostile toward women since its inception, and mandating that they wear the hijab is a highly visible part of its efforts to control and marginalize them. Enforcement of the veil rule has only increased under President Ebrahim Raisi’s government. Yet prior to the current demonstrations, leading critics of the regime were reluctant to prioritize refusal of the “compulsory veil” as a political demand, often ignoring female activists’ justified pressure to include the unique forms of oppression suffered by half of society. In her 2011 book *The Hijab and Intellectuals*, prominent activist Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani showed how even the most secular and liberal political critics and dissidents have consistently avoided recognizing the regime’s systematic oppression of women’s freedom and dignity; she also focused on the compulsory veil as a fundamental rather than secondary problem. Today’s movement has revealed a drastic change in the way many Iranians look at their plight and its potential solutions, with more citizens apparently seeing women’s rights as the best starting point for their democratic struggle against Islamist obscurantism.

Many young protesters seem to be forging their own path apart from existing political opposition groups and figures—whether reformists inside the country or dissidents abroad. One of the most astonishing aspects of the current movement is that it is overwhelmingly composed of young Iranians under age twenty-five who identify themselves as more than just opponents of Islamist ideology—they are also avowedly alien to the mindset of the older generation, including anti-regime politicians. This shows that real forces of change can emerge and self-organize without intervention by conventional dissident groups or personalities. It also raises the question of who is directing the movement, and whether it will be able to establish an organic leadership before becoming exhausted or crumbling under violent suppression.

In sum, the movement’s nature, organization style, leadership, and core ideals are sharply different from all previous political protests in the Islamic Republic. This courageous experiment could spur more significant developments in Iran over the coming days and weeks, though little is known about its ability to weather serious challenges in the

long run.

Policy Recommendations

In general, foreign government statements supporting and sympathizing with Iran's anti-regime protesters are less helpful than similar gestures from nongovernmental entities, including communication and digital companies (e.g., Google, Amazon, Apple), human rights institutions, famous civil resistance figures, foreign democratic movements, and individual academics, literary figures, and artists. Even so, U.S. and European officials can still play an exceptional role in helping the movement or, at least, avoiding harmful actions.

For example, now is not the time to implement financial arrangements that decrease pressure on the regime—including [sanctions relief \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/letting-iran-go-nuclear\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/letting-iran-go-nuclear) stemming from the ongoing nuclear talks. Any action that can be perceived as Western indifference toward the Iranian people's longtime suffering should be consciously avoided. Their democratic, secular, and liberal aspirations are perhaps the best force for advancing peace and security in the Middle East, since they will be the ones responsible for establishing a government committed to those principles should the current regime fall.

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