

The Tenacity of Young Iranians in the Protest Movement

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Brief Analysis

Despite the regime's crackdown, Iranian protestors are showing unprecedented resilience and unity in their demands, making the international community's next steps even more crucial.

Once again, Iranians have come out into the streets to protest against their government, its policies, and its leaders. Once again they face a regime that has proved itself tone-deaf to widespread public discontent—responding instead with brutality, arrests, mass trials, and executions. But this recent wave of protests has proved different. The regime is being confronted by its own children—a generation of young women and men who seek not just reform, not just an easing of controls, but a regime change.

The protest movement was triggered when 22-year old Mahsa Amini died while in police custody, beaten to death by the morality police on September 16 because the form of her hijab was not to their liking. Protests quickly erupted immediately after her death, and they are now in their third month.

The problem of the mandatory hijab has been haunting Iranian women since the early days of the Islamic revolution. For over forty years, the leadership of the Islamic Republic has been obsessed with women's hair, make up, and dress. In many respects, the regime acts as if it has one mission—to subjugate and repress women and to treat them as second-class citizens, denying them their rights and equality under the law. To ensure the success of this mission, the regime has unleashed the morality police on the masses, teaching them to 'behave.' But now the Iranian women—especially younger women—are fighting back. Mahsa's death became the breaking point of mounting anger and frustration.

Iranian women were soon joined in their protests by young men, university students, high schoolers, and even elementary school children. University of Tehran students have traditionally played an important role in political protests, as they did in the 1951-1953 oil nationalization movement and the movement that led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Under the Islamic Republic, these students were at the forefront in protests during the

presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1999, and in the national protests over the allegedly rigged presidential elections in 2009. During the current uprising, university campuses have been similarly in turmoil as well. At Sharif University in Tehran, for example, and at several other campuses across the country, students have engaged in sit-down strikes and as a consequence have suffered attacks with tear gas and live ammunition.

What started as a feminist protest movement is turning into an all-out uprising which some, including French President Emmanuel Macron, are calling a revolution. The leading slogans of the protesters have remained “Women, Life, Liberty,” and “death to the dictator”—the latter directed at Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Even the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, has not been spared the wrath of the demonstrators. Schoolchildren have torn down pictures of both Khamenei and Khomeini. Khomeini’s home in the town of Khomein in central Iran, which was turned into a museum in his honor, was set on fire on November 17.

Facing—and clearly fearing—a widespread uprising, the regime has reached for its usual arsenal of weapons: fearful threats, sending the riot police and the Basij paramilitary forces into the streets, universities, and schools, and directing the security forces to use extreme means, including live ammunition, to disperse the demonstrators and quell protests. The regime has also decided to present a solid front to the protesters.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi have declared their unstinting support for the security forces. Khamenei even said that the security forces have been unjustly treated. Both have blamed Israel, the United States, and other foreign agents and their local ‘lackeys’ for the protests. While crowd control has so far been left to the riot police and the Basij, the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) have threatened the protesters to go home or face their contingents. There was not a single dissenting voice when 227 of the 290 deputies in Iran’s parliament called on the judiciary to punish the demonstrators with the harshest possible penalties.

The results of this decision to respond to peaceful protests by brute force? According to human rights organizations, 15,000 protestors have been arrested so far, and they face charges and probably mass trials. Over 326 people have been killed, among them more than 40 children and 27 or more women. Still, this mass brutality has not succeeded in frightening the people off the streets. On the contrary, protestors have their own message for the regime: we are here to stay, we want regime change, we want an end to the Islamic Republic.

Much of this tenacity is driven by the fact that the younger generation and the Iranian people in general have had enough. They are tired of a corrupt regime that has impoverished the country. They are tired of the dire economic situation, rising inflation, the high cost of living, and the huge gap between the haves and the have-nots. They are tired of political repression, a muzzled press, and rigged elections. They are tired of interference by the state in their private lives. They are tired of sanctions and isolation from the rest of the world.

Rather than intimidating the young, the security forces’ brutality, beatings, arrests, and killings, and the physical abuse and rapes taking place in prisons seems to have only strengthened the determination of this younger generation to continue. The regime is facing a youth—women and men—who are educated, savvy, and connected through social media to the rest of the world.

Notably, over the past few months Iran’s ‘Gen Z’ has won the respect of workers, technocrats, teachers, shopkeepers, and employees in both the public and private sectors. On different occasions, oil refinery workers in the south, shopkeepers in Tehran and other cities, and merchants in bazaars across the country have staged one-day strikes in sympathy with the protesters scattered across Iran, with particularly intense and sustained opposition to the regime in the regions of Iranian Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan.

Another striking feature of these protests is that, for the first time, the previously-divided members of the Iranian diaspora across four continents have in large numbers echoed the demands of the ‘young revolutionaries’ in Iran. The diaspora has taken on the role of passing on messages from inside Iran to the outside world: that the young

women and men who came out into the streets of Iranian cities, some paying dearly with their lives, would like to live in a modern society with democratic values, connected to the outside world and no longer treated as pariahs.

The United States, European nations, and other countries and international organizations can support this movement in a number of ways. They have already made clear their support for the Iranian people and they have condemned the use of force by the Islamic regime. They have also demanded an immediate end to the killings, arrests, and imprisonments of the protestors.

Moving forward, these international entities can now start to delegitimize any mass trials and call for an end to death sentences. The international community should put pressure on relevant international organizations to take seriously their mandate of looking into violations of the demonstrators' human rights, including the killing and arrest of schoolchildren and university students. They should insist that the Iranian government not block Iranians' access to social media and the internet. European countries with diplomatic representation and relations with Iran must let the government know that there can be no 'business as usual' as long as the violation of human rights and repression continues. ❖

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