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COMMENTARY

THE MAHSA AMINI PROTESTS IN IRAN

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In Iran Protests, The Long Fight For Freedoms

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“In our dream, wind will blow into women’s hairs, in our dream, children will not be forced to learn ideologies of the Middle Ages, in our dreams, no one will attack girls’ schools... no one will shoot at them from behind”, was the line of Hamed Esmailion (Iranian-Canadian activist at a rally organised to support the protests in Iran).

Defying a crackdown by security forces, it is almost two months since protests started across Iran, and have lost little momentum. Discarding their legally-mandated Islamic head scarves, women have been at the forefront of the demonstrations over the death in September 2022 of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini who had been arrested by the morality police for wearing an ‘improper’ hijab in violation of Iranian law. According to eyewitnesses, Amini was beaten in custody, an assertion denied by the authorities.



COMMENTS

Background

The death of a young woman named Mahsa Amini in police custody, under the charge for 'in-appropriate' way of wearing the hijab, is the trigger point for a large-scale unrest in vivid parts of Iran, today. In addition to large cities such as Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, and Bushehr, the protest has spread violently into smaller settlements and towns. Most active protests are being witnessed currently in the Kurdish-dominated provinces as Mahsa Amini was an ethnic Kurd. Starting off as an anti-hijab, centring on women rights and freedom of choice, they slowly evolved into an anti-radical, anti-regime movement uniting protestors from vivid socio-political ethnicities.

The global media categorises the current protest as unprecedented in the recorded history of the Islamic Republic of Iran with many historians and scholars declaring it as a feminist protest against the regime. The scale of the protest is high but it is nowhere in scale or in intensity as compared to the bloody October 2019 protest ("Bloody Aban Protest") where the numbers of casualties and those of killed remains unknown. That said, the segment that makes this protest unique from the earlier ones is the level of self-organization the people have been able to manage and administer leaderless. This is a reflection of Iranian peoples learning the ways to fight against an organized security architecture and organize protest using digital mediums, even after the government imposing restrictions on all forms of communication. It is important to note that, after numerous intense clashes and police raids, there is no loss in the momentum of Iranian protesters. Instead, the author sees it to be strengthening. Thus, irrespective of whatsoever outcome, people have taken the first sip of empowerment and if these protests continue, it will be more radical than Tehran's ideology based principles of governance.

On that note, since the October 2019 revolt, no protest at such a large scale has occurred. There have been teachers protesting regularly, local riots in parts of Ahvaz and small scale protests in parts of Esfahan. After violence erupting during the protest of 2019, Iranians lost their momentum and some may have become pessimistic on the account of inadequate numbers to withstand the government's oppression.

Nonetheless, serious socio-economic challenges, an unpopular hardliner president in power with ministers discredited in the Iranian society, and the invoking rules & laws based on Iranian moral principles, created unbearable socio-economic stress in the lives of local Iranians.

The Anti-hijab Movement

The anti-hijab movement had started before Mahsa Amini's death, in response to excruciating torture by morality police, encouraged by the conservative/ Islamic hard liner President Ebrahim Raisi. The first anti-hijab movement was organised in the summer of 2022, primarily in the digital space using the hashtag: نه_به_حجاب_اجباری (no to the compulsory hijab). Before its eruption, activism was broadly centred on uploading photos without hijab across Iran. The death of Mahsa Amini in police custody lit a match to already aggravated Iranians whose aggression erupted against the regime.

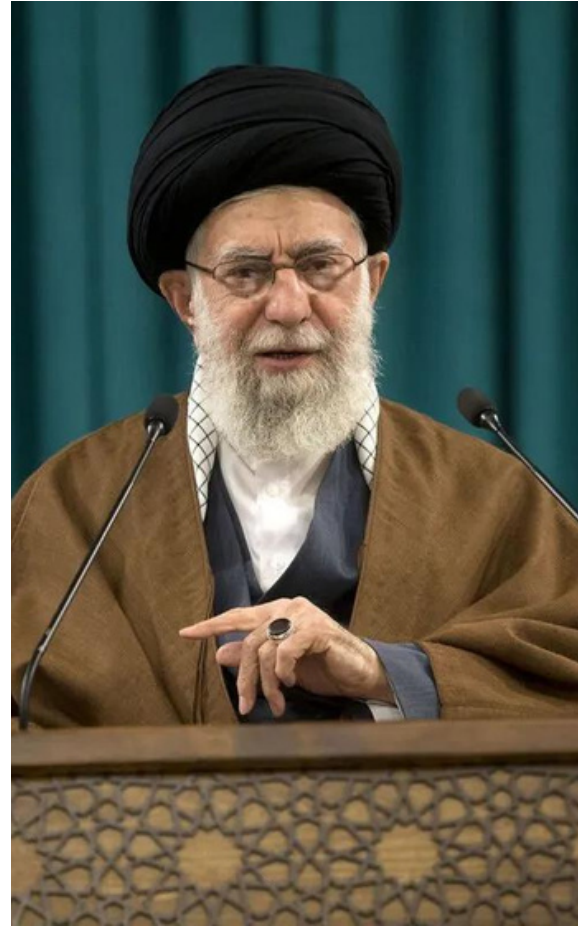
That said, the protest witnessed an amalgamation of anti-Islamic and some traditional Iranians against the regime. Those opposing the regime are staunch believers of Shia Islam values but are completely dissatisfied with the policies under the Vilayat-e Faqih.

The regime has a tendency to nominate some loyalists from the society within their ranks. Those nominated have either played a unique role in revolution or have participated in various conflicts in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon. They receive financial benefits from various Islamic societies and non-government organizations. However, tightened sanctions and phenomenal increase in inflation have impacted negatively in their living standards. Additionally, numerous military and police officers have found themselves facing poor quality of living, conditions similar to millions of Iranians.

Taking the nature of dynamism in protests, they had to undertake risk-taking tasks, in a time where their salaries couldn't meet the basic standards of living. Hence, before undertaking missions many questioned the state's ability to provide them better standards of living and an increased pay, some even questioning their allegiance to the state.

Iran Crisis: 09 Week of protest

In the last week we witnessed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei escalating responses against prominent Sunni Cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid, who continues to criticise the regime. Khamenei's discontent is visible through his decision to dispatch a high-ranking delegation headed under the leadership of Friday Prayer Leader Policy Council Chief Mohammad Javad Haj Ali Akbari to the provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan. Ali Akbari is a staunch advocate of harsh sentences for protesters terming the activist's actions as "barbaric". During his visit Ali Akbari meet with the members of the local Sunni academics including Abdol Hamid where he faced accusations on state sponsored acts of discrimination against the Iranian Sunni community. Abdol Hamid also criticised the state of failure to condemn violent suppression by security forces on anti-regime protestors in the cities of Zahedan and Khash. Abdol Hamid has been making staunch criticisms against the regime, and Iranian experts argue that his writings may have fueled violence throughout Sistan and Baluchestan Province.



Source: Middle East Monitor

This is confirmed by a large gathering of protestors, primarily Zahedan residents participating in anti-regime protests post Abdol Hamid's Friday sermons last week. Ali Akbari's points towards an effort to influence Abdol Hamid from making any further anti-regime incitation's through any means. He is facing a direct confrontation from the Supreme Leader himself, who through Ali Akbari have warned him. His last Friday sermons suggest that he will intend to continue his support to the anti-regime protestors.

Lack of trust in provincial leadership?

Ali Akbari's visit to local provincial leaders supporting anti-regime protests throughout Sistan and Baluchestan Province, can be understood as a lack of trust in provincial leadership. His visit in the regions comes as a surprise to this author: Khamenei has representation in all Iran's 31 provinces, and tasking Ali Akbari for a representation in Sistan and Baluchestan Province was not needed. On one scholar's account, Ali Akbari had spoken twice with Sistan and Baluchistan supreme leader representative and provincial governor and tasked them to take special actions against the protestors and spoke of special plans invoked by the supreme leader. This points towards discontent and an utter failure of provincial officials to curb the on-going unrest in Sistan and Baluchistan.

An Iranian Arab Spring Moment?

The scenes of widespread protest show familiarity to that of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, to Hossein Shahidi, who as an independent journalist present in Tehran. The author has analysed six factors that shows similarity with the 1978-79 Revolution and have the potency to seriously challenge Tehran:

The rhetoric among the protestors is for a complete abolishment of the Islamic Republic, not to bring reforms.

- There is a wedge between political priorities set by the state and that of the society.
- There is a sense of division even within the ruling elites, with certain conservatives appearing to support the protestors than the state.
- The social classes have a uniform response: expression of solidarity as one. With common grievances against the state, workers strike and protests have combined to form a unified response against state oppression and have become a beacon of voice for the oppressed.
- The torchbearers of this protests are young women, against whom Tehran is reluctant to employ aggressive and unprecedented use of violence at a larger scale (some may argue aggression on the account of security forces killing almost 200 protesters till date, but as compared to the Bloody November protest, Tehran's reluctance is justified).
- The society does not anymore believe in the state's claim of interference and provocation by the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia and similar states.

A Revolution.....not yet!

That said, unlike many analysts predicted, the Mahsa Amini protest is not a revolution, not even near to it. This further points to a difficult road ahead for both the protesters and Tehran. Tehran will with time understand the limitations of violence and it will then be forced to employ new avenues to de-legitimise this protest. For the protests, the fear has completely vanquished from their hearts as Iranians, including the most devout and traditional have expressed anger and discontent towards the regime. The author predicts two scenarios going forward:

1. The government is able to successfully mobilise enforcement institutions, brings in the military, police and security agencies and enforces harsher tactics against the protestors. This will result in incomprehensible casualties than ever in the recorded history of Iran. Considering the momentum of protestors, this will not prevent waves of anti-government protest occurring in the future.
2. Protestors are victorious but Khamenei will never give up power, which raises three potent questions:
 - Who will lead Iran in the aftermath of this revolution?
 - Will religion play a major role in governance? If not,
 - What will be the opinion of hardliner followers of Shia Islam which leads the banner with all religious minorities under it?