



Iran's past, present and future in women's rights : Research Report

Women's Rights Team

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INTRODUCTION

The state of women's rights in the Republic of Iran has been the subject of national sorrow and international scrutiny for the past decades, accelerated ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But the current "Woman. Life. Freedom" movement has gained momentum in unprecedented ways, as the revolutionary and brave calls of women against restrictive policies have gained more international attention than ever before. This report covers the significance of the current demonstrations by first focusing on the historical context of women's rights in Iran and how various factors have contributed to their strengthening in some situations and their weakening in others. This context proves useful in understanding the origins of the current movements, which is the focus of Chapter 2, as well as how the Iranian government and the international community have responded. The report concludes with observations on the most recent developments in the State of Iran and questions what effects the protests will have on women's rights in the future. It highlights the importance of appealing to international human rights and the unstoppable power and bravery of the Iranian people and claiming the rights they deserve.

Chapter 1

1. Historical Background

“Woman. Life. Freedom.” Words that have now shaken the world thanks to the courageous and resilient women of Iran, as the death of Mahsa Amini has ignited an unprecedented wave of protests turning into a revolution in the country. But, while the events and protests have been conceptualised as “unprecedented” to emphasise their uniqueness, one must look at the indomitable resistance of women throughout Iranian history to fully grasp the current women-initiated movement (Panah, 2022).

To begin with, there are six periods that have significantly shaped women's rights in the country. These are the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), the Khomeini decade (1979-1989), the Rafsanjani presidency (1989-1997), the Khatami years (1997-2005), the Ahmadinejad years (2005-2013), and the Rouhani years (2013-2021). While the general idea is to consider women's rights in Iran before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there is more to delve into in order to get a better insight and perspective on what has happened in 2022 and what might happen to women's rights in the future.

1.1. Pahlavi Era (1925-1979)

During the 54-year period, women's rights in Iran were overhauled and modernised by the policies implemented by Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah, changing women's lives considerably. The country went through a series of reforms to promote secularism, heavily influenced by the UK and the USA, but also to control and suppress clerical resistance (Sedghi, 2012). From education to political involvement, women gradually gained the fundamental rights that were already protected for men. In 1936, with the opening of Tehran University, men and women were admitted to a university for the first time in Iran's history (Esfandiari, 2010). Moreover, in the same year, on January 7th, Reza Shah issued a highly radical decree known as the *Kashf-e* hijab which aimed to ban all Islamic veils, including the hijab and chador, after his state visit to Turkey in 1934 (Sedghi, 2012). The shift was driven in some way by the influence of its neighbouring country, Turkey, particularly by the visionary and secular leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Maranlou, 2022). However, whilst this change might be seen as an improvement, the Shah's new approach to Islamic dress and the covering of women's faces with hijab and burqa, has once again radically reversed the situation, rather than advancing women's rights, by imposing a new oppression on women. Meaning, Shah has given a new authority to the police to remove a woman's hijab if they see it. Thus, publicly wearing headgear other than European hats became illegal (Hoodfar, 1999). Although the original aim was to weaken the influence of conservatism in society, the imposition of obligation or pressure on women, regardless of the objective, can never be deemed an act of progress. Since then, the hijab has become and remains a controversial issue in Iranian politics. And as a result, It did not take long for the religious conservatives to demand the return of the veil in public after the abduction of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, in 1941.

On a political level, in 1963 with the launch of the “White Revolution” by Shah, women were granted the right to run for parliament and the right to vote. Even on the eve of the Iranian revolution, there were 22 women in parliament and 333 women in elected local councils (Esfandiari, 2010). Also, in 1967, under the Family Protection Act, the right to seek a divorce as well as to obtain custody of children was established for women. Meaning a husband could no longer unilaterally divorce his wife or automatically obtain custody of the children (Sedghi, 2012). This Act significantly improved family dynamics through radical reform in an effort to change the deeply entrenched inequalities in Islamic family law (Mir-Hosseini, 1993). While the country is today portrayed as non-democratic, authoritar-

ian and underdeveloped in the eyes of the world, history has proven that there was a period of “*Lumière*” for Iranian women back then (Baker&Quince, 2022).

On the other hand, under Reza Shah, women's groups and organisations were officially disbanded and lost their members due to strict censorship of what they could say or publish (Hoodfar, 1999). The string on the women's movement and organisation by the government made it more difficult for women to come together and protect the independence of their organisations. The Iranian Women's Rights Movement, for example, lasted until 1933, as the last women's association was dissolved by the government (DBpedia, N.D).

The Pahlavi Era has marked in Iranian history with its struggle to determine modernity and modernism, as these concepts remain dynamic and non-unified (Brooks, 2008). That is, the definition of modernism can vary depending on the political power and regime in a state, but also according to the changing context throughout history. The complexity of defining modernism and modernity, and balancing it with the traditional understandings embedded in societies' cultures, was at the centre of the outcome of the rising aggression and anger against the Shah (Brooks, 2008). While women's demands and movements for education, socio-economic and political participation were heard and implemented in one form or another, they did not adapt to or take into account the demands or culture of the country. For example, until 1979, the anniversary of the introduction of the Islamic Dress Ban Law was officially celebrated as Women's Liberation Day in Iran. At first glance, this may seem like a liberation of women, yet at that time many lower middle class and low-income urban women felt trapped in their homes (Hoodfar, 1999). Thus, the Unveiling Act had a reverse impact on the lives of some women, mostly living in the countryside, as they began to rely more and more on their sons, husbands or men in general to carry out their public duties such as shopping or engaging in economic activities outside their homes (Hoodfar, 1999). Thus, the growing frustration has had the effect of spurring the return of conservative religious leaders to the county.

In 1978, protests erupted, with women at the forefront, showing dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime. Haleh Esfandiari, a director and distinguished fellow of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center in Washington DC says “the slogan of that revolution was ‘independence, freedom, Islamic Republic,’ [but] nobody had an idea what the ‘Islamic Republic’ meant,” (Baker&Quince, 2022).

1.2. The Khomeini Decade (1979-1989)

The beginning of this period is considered to be a tipping point for Iran. Because the 1979 Islamic revolution manifested itself in the most aggressive and destructive way against the policies and improvements achieved over the years, especially regarding women's rights. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and leader of the revolution, ruled for ten years with the utmost viciousness and bloodshed, massacring children, dissenting journalists, judges, and many others through the fatwas he issued (Ghajar, 2022).

There are few countries that have undergone a similarly radical regression in a remarkably short period of time in terms of human rights– and by extension, women's rights– as Iran. Meaning, while Shah's modernisation, or Westernisation, policies improved women's lives and rights, challenging patriarchal norms that impeded women's advancement and development in the country, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, on the other hand, drastically reverted those developments. To give a concrete example,

in 1967 and 1975, with the Family Protection Law, the bridle imposed on women by the state and the clergy was lifted, including the decrease in the role of the latter in the family sphere (Hanna, 2020). Polygamy was curtailed in this process, only to return and humiliate women yet again in 1979 under the revolutionary Shiite leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He reinstated the previous laws, which allowed men to divorce their wives by simple declaration and to give them custody of their children without question (Nahvi, 2022).

Moreover, the striking consequences of the 1979 Islamic revolution are manifest not only in family affairs but also in women's bodies and their political rights. In readjusting to Islamic law, Iranian girls were appallingly allowed to marry after puberty, which they consider to be nine years old as of 1982 (Hanna, 2020). Also, the subject of imposing dress codes on women was brought up once again, but Iranian women were not going to give up their hard-won rights so easily (Nahvi, 2022). Thus, on March 8th, 1979, women took to the streets to launch massive protests to prevent the hijab from becoming mandatory in the country. Although the protests had an impact for a short time, it was unfortunately reinstated in 1983. Nevertheless, this loss was never the end of women's resistance and their collective actions, but only the beginning of a movement that would continue for years, even up to 2022. As a result, many campaigns were launched in response to the oppression caused by the 1979 Islamic revolution in the country, such as My Stealthy Freedom in 2014, White Wednesdays in 2017, The Girls of Revolution Street in 2017, and the Iranian #MeToo movement.

Women in Iran have therefore always played a pivotal role in the advancement of women's rights, especially through the resistance they have shown with marches and demonstrations for years. From the very beginning, women knew that they were the only ones who could take concrete action. In other words, the power to change these deeply embedded discriminatory and patriarchal values could and did come only from women themselves. Having said that, the Islamic Republic has never hesitated to systematically use violence against women as of 1980. Khomeini's government executed many women who refused to obey the hijab law or the regime itself on the grounds of prostitution or "war against God" (Shannon, 2022). This level of violence is revealed in different ways such as torture and sexual assault against female political prisoners at the time (Shannon, 2022).

Furthermore, the 1979 Islamic revolution, which overthrew the U.S-backed monarchy, was not the only crucial political event that had a major impact on the status of women during the Khomeini decade. From 1980 to 1988, the Iran-Iraq war was also considered to have a significant impact, especially with regard to the work sector. The eight years of war drove women into occupations such as nurses, doctors or supporters of soldiers and turned them into breadwinners (Hanna, 2020). Although women participated more and more in the labour force during the war, according to Iran Primer, statistics showed yet again that "in the first decade of the revolution, women's share of the labour force dropped from about 13 per cent to 8.6 per cent" (Esfandiari, 2010). Once female judges were also barred from serving after the revolution and demoted to other jobs, such as administrative tasks. Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian political activist and lawyer, was among those judges.

1.3. The Rafsanjani Presidency (1989-1997)

Khomeini's abrupt death paved the way for a new era, especially for women, in 1989 and in 1993 under the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. During this period, the pragmatic approaches to women's issues gradually eased the oppression and repression against women in the county. Prominent developments were first the lifting of restrictions on women's employment in engineering and legal

professions, and then the reduction of punishments for improper dresses (Hanna, 2020). Yet, the most significant achievement of this period was the success in curbing the birth rate per woman, mainly through the provision of free contraceptives (Esfandiari, 2010). Abortion was also allowed in cases where a woman's life was threatened.

In terms of compliance with human rights at the international level, including children's rights, Iran signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child on September 5th, 1991, but ratified it on July 13th, 1994. However, although Article 1 sets the age of majority for all children at eighteen, Iran has made a reservation to this convention because at that time the age of majority was set at nine in the country, which would rise to 13 in 2002.

Moreover, in the 1990s, women started to be more visible in decision-making. First, in 1992, they won 13 seats in parliament, which may not seem like a significant number today, but it was an important development after the 1979 Islamic revolution (Hanna, 2020). And then in 1996, Zahra Sadr Azam Nouri made history as the first woman mayor in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Mehrnews, 2013). In addition, in 1992, Rafsanjani approved a bill allowing women to claim alimony if their husbands seek a divorce (Hanna, 2020).

1.4. The Khatami Years (1997-2005)

Khatami's election ushered in a new era of progressive reforms on women's rights, even portrayed as "moderate" by Western media outlets (Abdelfatah & Arablouei, 2022). Such developments manifested themselves in Khatami's enactment of a series of laws granting women greater legal rights in divorce cases and improving their access to higher education. Thus, as a result of these laws, "from 1990 to 2000 the number of women entering university tripled" (Hanna, 2020).

Accordingly, one could argue that the authoritarian milieu, which has tied women's hands and restricted their freedoms since the revolution, was at least improved and softened under Khatami. Although there has never been complete freedom in terms of women's rights, women have reached higher positions in decision-making than previously. For example, he appointed Masoumeh Ebtekar as vice president for the environment, and Zahra Shojai as an advisor for women's affairs (Abdelfatah & Arablouei, 2022). As a matter of fact, under Khatami, women have been elected to parliament more than at any time since the revolution (Abdelfatah & Arablouei, 2022).

Khatami's attitude towards women therefore can be clearly summarised by his own words during a statement he made in 2005: "We should have a comprehensive view of the role of women and before anything else, should not regard women as second-class citizens" (Radio Free Europe, 2005).

1.5. The Ahmadinejad Years (2005-2013)

The 2005 elections came with chaos and darkness on women's rights following several years of progress under Rafsanjani and Khatami. Even days before the election, women were chanting on the streets and saying: "We are women. We are children of this land. But we have no rights" (Hanna, 2020). That is, from the beginning, women were aware of the potential danger that this new leader could pose to

them. Yet, with the result of the election, the conservative Ahmadinejad came to power, and the clock began to turn back once again.

Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's hardline conservative attitude began to manifest itself rapidly, starting with education. As of 2005, women were banned from majoring in computer science, engineering, political science, accounting, business administration and public administration (Hanna, 2020). The aim was once again to push women into more traditional roles, thus limiting them to appropriate professions or motherhood, as the patriarchal system demands.

The One Million Signatures Campaign also spread across the country during Ahmadinejad's term. The aim was both to raise awareness of the legal codes imposed on women and to demand equal rights in marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance. This campaign, therefore, represented the convergence of a broad spectrum of ideas focusing on family laws and discrimination against women. It was officially launched in 2006 by Iranian women, but unfortunately never reached its goal. However, despite the outcome, the campaign made its mark in the world, receiving numerous awards, including the 2008 Olof Palme Prize, the Simone de Beauvoir Prize and the Global Women's Rights award (Passanante, 2011).

During this period, many actions were taken against women who dared to raise their voices and fight for the equality they deserved. The crackdown on women's rights intensified in 2008, with dozens of women in arbitrary detention, the imposition of travel bans, and harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2008). According to a 2008 Human Rights Watch report on Iran, eight women's rights activists were arrested in June, and Sussan Tahmasebi, a leader of the One Million Signatures for Equality Campaign, was prevented from boarding a plane by security officials who then confiscated her passport without charging her with any crime (Human Rights Watch, 2008). On the judicial side, women engaged in peaceful activities in defence of their rights were also prosecuted on charges of "disturbing public opinion", "propaganda against the order" and "publishing false news". Earlier in the year, four women were also sentenced to six months in prison each for writing on feminist websites. In 2008, *Zanan*, the only Iranian feminist magazine, was shut down after 16 years of publication (Hanna, 2020).

Hostility towards women and the reawakening of religious conservatism reached a horrific level with the creation, under Ahmadinejad, of the Guidance Patrol or *Gasht-e-Ershad*, known as the morality police. However, it was not until 2006 that they began patrolling the streets to properly "enforce" the dress code in public according to Islamic law (Ghaedi, 2022). The obligation to cover the head and wear loose-fitting clothing in public places has been imposed on all girls since 1983 once they reach puberty. The major risk, however, is that there is no specific description of what is proper dress for women in Iran. This void is therefore filled by a wide range of interpretations by the morality police, who put women at greater risk as they arbitrarily stop and detain them on the streets. In their first official appearance, the male morality police were recognizable by their green uniforms and the women by their black chadors (Ghaedi, 2022).

During the 2009 presidential elections, a reformist candidate questioned whether there was really a need for the *Gasht-e-Ershad*, while advocating the idea that wearing the hijab should be a choice for women in Iran (Prakash, 2022). Nevertheless, there has never been any change or concrete action on the issue.

1.6. The Rouhani Years (2013-2021)

During the Rouhani years, women's rights issues have had a mixed record. There have been improvements in women's empowerment, not only in decision-making, but also in terms of legal rights such as the possibility of passing on citizenship to children of foreign spouses (Hanna, 2020). In 2019, for example, for the first time in almost four decades, women were allowed to attend an international football match in Tehran. Nevertheless, despite efforts, no progressive reform has been made. Therefore, it was in May 2017 that women launched the white scarf or white Wednesdays movement by taking off their headscarves in public places on Wednesdays or wearing white shawls to protest against the strict dress code in Iran (Hatam, 2017).

With regard to mandatory hijab laws, Iran's new Islamic Penal Code, approved in 2009 but only ratified by the Guardian Council in 2014, states in Article 638 that:

anyone in public places and roads who openly commits a harām (sinful) act, in addition to the punishment provided for the act, shall be sentenced to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes; and if they commit an act that is not punishable but violates public prudency, they shall only be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes (Islamic Penal Code, 2013).

In a note under this article, it specifies also that "women, who appear in public places and roads without wearing an Islamic hijab, shall be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred Rial". The morality police viciously patrol the streets and surveil women and girls in Iran on the basis of something that has never been specified. In other words, there is, to date, no indication that expressly states how one should dress in public places in order to comply with Islamic law.

Moreover, this time in 2018, the Girls of Revolution Street movement was launched and many women protested once again against the compulsory hijab law that had limited the freedom over their own bodies since 1983 (Farda, 2018). The resistance was manifested by women removing their headscarves and waving them like a flag while standing on a platform. Thus, since 2018, numerous arrests of peaceful protesters but also of human rights lawyers, journalists, activists and more have taken place. Among the most well-known cases, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights lawyer, was sentenced to 38 years in prison for representing a woman protesting against the compulsory hijab, on charges of "espionage" and "collusion against national security" (Hanna, 2020). She will be eligible for parole in 2030. Or Sahar Khodayari, a 29-year-old woman arrested while trying to enter a stadium to watch a football match and accused of 'wearing an inappropriate hijab', set herself on fire outside the Tehran courthouse in September 2019 after being threatened with six months imprisonment (Esfandiari, 2019).

From 2017 to 2019, protests against the mandatory hijab law accelerated and as a result, arrests, detentions, and brutality by the morality police increased simultaneously. For example, in a 2014 poll conducted by the Iranian Center for Strategic Studies, it was revealed that 49 percent of Iranians were against the mandatory hijab (Mackintosh, 2018). A few years later, in 2020 this time, an independent survey by GAMAAN showed that 58% of Iranians did not believe in the hijab at all and 72 percent were against compulsory hijab (Maleki&Arab, 2020).

Moreover, these were not the only movements that began during Rouhani's time in office. The global #MeToo movement also hit Iran in 2020, and many women took to social media to share their own experiences of sexual assault and harassment. The movement was sparked by a group of women jour-

nalists who, in August 2020, recorded a video in which they shared their experiences of harassment by colleagues in the newsroom or influential people they had interviewed (Far, 2020). Others soon followed and spoke out about their own stories. Among them, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatal also broke the silence about the abuse she was subjected to in the summer of 2006, when she was sexually harassed and raped by a prominent painter (Esfandiari, 2020).

Women in Iran have therefore never given up seeking their rights and have always resisted oppression in one way or another. It is their activism and assertiveness that make them phenomenal throughout history and today as well. Their unwavering struggle against the repression generated by the system has never lessened or ceased to exist. On the contrary, it has grown step by step, year by year. For instance, the compulsory veil has never been off the agenda for many women, and through their campaigns, movements and demonstrations they have ensured that this issue is never forgotten. From 1979 onwards, calls for “freedom for women” began to echo in every street and corner of Iran, turning by 2022 into the slogan of a revolutionary movement for all women, but this time with the slogan “Women. Life. Freedom” in the world.

Chapter 2

2. “WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM”: The Emergence of Protests in Iran in 2022

2.1. Overview of the Movement

The year 2022 will be marked in the history of Iran due to the emergence of an important wave of protests referred to as “Woman, Life, Freedom”. The movement arose in September, after the death of the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Jina Mahsa Amini, while in the custody of the Iranian morality police (Abadi, 2022).

Amini was taken in custody by the so-called morality police on September 13th, 2022, due to the improper use of the hijab while she was in “her brother’s car on a visit to the capital to see their relatives” (Shahrokni, 2022; Iran International, 2022). Reports indicate that she was beaten by the police inside the van taking her to a detention centre, which led her to a coma (United Nations, 2022e). Supporting these claims, a source from the hospital where she died alleges that “her brain tissue was crushed after ‘multiple blows’ to the head” (Iran International, 2022). Three days later, on September 16th, Amini died in an Iranian hospital (Shahrokni, 2022).

The Iranian Government referred to the event as an “unfortunate incident”, and claimed that she died of natural causes, after suffering a heart attack (Alkhalidi & Mostaghim, 2022). However, “some reports suggested that Amini’s death was a result of alleged torture and ill-treatment” (United Nations, 2022e). Her family denies she suffered from pre-existing heart conditions, and says she had bruises on her legs (Voice of America, 2022).

Amini’s death sparked an intense wave of protests in Iran (Nahvi, 2022). Even during her hospitalisation, citizens have shown discontentment with the morality police, which is said to enforce the mandatory hijab law through violence and humiliation (Hooman, 2022). Firstly, crowds were gathered outside of the hospital where she died, and soon the protests spread to other cities, as well as on social media (Shahrokni, 2022). It has been reported that the movement spread from Tehran to 50 other cities across Iran (Nahvi, 2022).

On September 17th, during Amini’s funeral in Saqez, her hometown, protests erupted with chants of “death to the dictator” (Voice of America, 2022). As the protests spread, on the 18th, hundreds of people gathered around the University of Tehran and shouting “Woman, Life, Freedom” (“Jin, Jîyan, Azadî”) (Voice of America, 2022), which became the main slogan adopted for the protests (Shahrokni, 2022). This phrase was originally used in the twentieth century, during the Kurdish freedom movement (Talbert, 2022), and was later used during the war against ISIS by female Kurdish fighters, between 2014 and 2019 (The Iran Primer, 2022b).

The movement has mainly been conducted through peaceful and nonviolent protests (Askew, 2022). In the protests, several women are choosing not to wear the hijab in public, sometimes burning them or cutting their hair and chanting “death to the dictator” (Talbert, 2022). Protests are also conducted through social media, where women post pictures without their hijabs. The internet is posing an important factor in the movement, as it allows women to find a support community in and outside of Iran, to connect and organise, and to share their experiences with the regime (Nahvi, 2022).

Other manifestations have included strikes on schools, universities, and the country’s vital oil sector, and some shops have shut their doors. In addition, some support for the movement has been shown during the World Cup in Qatar, as Iranian players have refused to sing the national anthem and fans have chanted slogans against the regime (Askew, 2022).

Nonetheless, despite their peaceful nature, the protests have sometimes resulted in violent clashes, including the torching of buildings of the security forces by protestors (Askew, 2022). For instance, on September 22nd, it is reported that protesters torched police stations and vehicles in Tehran and other cities (Voice of America, 2022).

The movement is mainly led by women and girls, mostly from the Gen Z generation, with also the participation of young men (International Center for Research on Women, n.d., Nahvi, 2022). It does not possess a clear leadership, and the movement is revolutionary in character (Abadi, 2022).

Although the movement started with a fight for justice for and indignation regarding Amini's premature death, it has grown to encompass several discontentments of Iranian women and to become a much wider movement (Shahrokni, 2022; Hooman, 2022). The protests have escalated to target the very foundations of the Islamic regime and its ideological taboos, seeking for a change in Iranian leadership and a stop to gender discrimination (Hooman, 2022; Talbert, 2022). It is described that the movement demands "an end to systems of oppression and patriarchal laws and the theocratic government" (International Center for Research on Women, n.d.), and poses one of the greatest threats the regime has faced since 1979 (Hooman, 2022). This broader character of the movement is also demonstrated as it is sometimes referred to as "the beginning of the end", implying the revolutionary character of the movement and that the protesters see the end of the dictatorship as very close (CrimethInc., 2022). Additionally, the protests are the longest-running since the Green Movement, after the presidential elections in 2009 (Abadi, 2022), and have been referred to by The Washington Post as "the longest major demonstrations against Iran's cleric-led security state" (Timsit & Berger, 2022)

2.2. Iran's Responses to the Protests

Responding to the events, the Iranian authorities have asserted that Amini's death occurred due to pre-existing medical conditions. They claim that the protests are incited by other countries to destabilise Iran (Talbert, 2022). Moreover, the Supreme Leader of Iran affirms that the protests were planned, in such a way even if Amini's death had not occurred, another excuse would have been found (The Iran Primer, 2022a).

Despite the predominantly peaceful nature of the movement, Iranian authorities claim the protests are dangerous and that they have been influenced by the West, and that more than 60 members of the Iranian security forces have been killed (Nahvi, 2022; Askew, 2022). As a response to the movement, the Government has reportedly restricted access to the internet and social media and has used violent methods in the suppression of protests (Nahvi, 2022).

Supporting the claims of violent repression, it has been reported that in Kurdish regions, troops, heavy weaponry, and military vehicles have been deployed, and that 50 calibre machine guns were fired on civilians, which are usually used in war zones (Voice of America, 2022). In addition, it was reported in September that a young Iranian woman was shot in the abdomen, neck, heart, and hand (Soni, 2022).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that, on September 30th, several dozen protesters were killed, representing the day of most deaths during the movement in 2022, which is referred to as "Bloody Friday" (HRW, 2022). According to Amnesty International, 66 people were killed on this day, including children (Amnesty International, 2022b). By verifying videos and photographs of this day, as well as interviewing witnesses, HRW identified that at least 12 people were killed, but emphasises that the actual numbers may be higher. It is narrated that the police and intelligence agents opened fire on protests from rooftops in Zahedan, including shooting a car transporting injured people to the hospital. At around noon, security forces shot teargas and bullets at a group of young protesters marching to Police

Station Number 16. In consequence, protesters began throwing stones and shouting protest slogans, and throughout the day some threw rocks and Molotov cocktails. HRW further clarifies that most protesters did not pose a serious threat to the security forces, demonstrating the disproportionality of the response (HRW, 2022).

The Security Council of Sistan and Baluchistan province issued a statement affirming that the clashes resulted in the death of six security force members, and 35 other people due to “negligence”, and dismissed the head of Police Station Number 16 and the head of police in Zahedan (HRW, 2022).

As of October 6th, 2022, the Center for Human Rights in Iran has estimated the arrest of 1,200 people, including 92 who were not detained while participating in the protests, but while at home or their workplaces (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2022). As stated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in the month of October, eight people were charged by the Islamic Revolution Court with crimes carrying the death penalty, including “waging war against God” (“*mo-harebeh*”) and “corruption on earth” (United Nations, 2022b). Later, it was announced that around 1,000 indictments were issued concerning the protests (United Nations, 2022b). The detainees faced charges such as collaborating with foreign governments and propaganda against the state, as well as charges with the possibility of the death penalty, including “corruption on Earth,” and “enmity against God” (The Iran Primer, 2022a). In addition, in the same month the Judiciary chief called for stricter sentencing, instructing the judges to avoid showing unnecessary sympathy (The Iran Primer, 2022a).

In a speech before the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in November, Javaid Rehman, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran expressed concern over the human rights situation in the State. As of that date, he affirmed that over 15,000 persons had been arrested since the start of the protests. He further affirmed the violent character of the responses, with instructions to violently repress people, and stated that “anyone taking part in the protests was quickly labelled as enemy to confront, as ‘terrorist’ or as ‘foreign agent attempting to destabilise Iran’” (UNHRC, 2022b). As of November 24th, the UN has reported that around 300 people had been killed during the movement, including at least 40 children (United Nations, 2022d).

In December, Iran Human Rights estimated the death of 458 people, including 63 children, and the issue of 11 death sentences (Iran Human Rights, 2022). In addition, 18,000 people had been detained, but it is suggested that the real numbers are likely to be higher (Askew, 2022).

On December 8th, the first execution of a protester was carried out. Mohsen Shekari was convicted for the charge of “enmity against God”, in what Amnesty International referred to as a “grossly unfair sham trial”. Amnesty International further identifies that this was in connection with accusations of “blocking a street in Tehran, creating fear and depriving people of freedom and security, and intentionally wounding a security agent with a cold weapon (knife)”, and emphasises that this is contrary to international law, as it requires that the death penalty is only imposed for the most serious crimes (Amnesty International, 2022a).

On the 12th of the same month, a second known execution was carried out. The man, identified as Majidreza Rahnavard, was convicted for “waging war against God”, for “reportedly killing two members of the Basij paramilitary force, and injuring four others on November 17” (Rebane & Moshtaghian, 2022).

Furthermore, it is reported that the government disrupted access to the internet by imposing curfews during certain hours, with the intent to block news concerning the movement and the government’s repression, and targeting social media (The Iran Primer, 2022a). On September 21st, Iranian authorities reportedly restrained access to Instagram and WhatsApp (Voice of America, 2022). In the same direc-

tion, the State has aired on television videos of women in conservative chadors expressing support to the Supreme Leader, as well as apologies from women who removed their hijabs or cut their hair (The Iran Primer, 2022a).

2.3. The International Community's Views on the Human Rights situation in Iran

The international community has demonstrated a deep concern over the human rights situation in Iran that emerged from the wave of protests regarding Amini's death and has expressed support for the movement and Iranian women.

The United Nations expressed apprehension over the human rights situation in Iran through a draft resolution approved by the UN's Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural). On November 16th, the motion was approved by a vote of 80 in favour to 28 against, with 68 abstentions. In the resolution, the Committee urged Iran to cease the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters, such as in the uprisings that followed Amini's death (United Nations, 2022a).

Several States have had the opportunity to manifest their views regarding the resolution. For instance, the representative of Canada called for accountability for the "deplorable actions", and expressed concern over the use of force, increasing use of the death penalty, restrictions to the internet, arbitrary detentions, and enforced disappearances. He further notes that Amini's death is just one instance of the human rights issues in Iran and that the "violent implementation of the hijab and chastity laws undermine the human rights of women and girls" (United Nations, 2022a).

Similarly, the Australian representative condemned the disproportionate use of force on protesters and affirms that sovereignty cannot be used as a shield allowing for human rights violations. The UK representative condemned the enforcement of the hijab by the morality police and stated that Amini's death represents a reminder of the oppression of women in Iran, expressing concern over the arrests and death sentences of the protesters. Nonetheless, Iran's representative rejected the draft, claiming that Iranian women are fully aware of their rights and that there was "no need for Western countries to advocate for them" (United Nations, 2022f).

Moreover, on November 24th, at its 35th special session, the UNHCR established an independent fact-finding mission to investigate the alleged human rights violations in Iran relating to the protests initiated on September 16th (UNHRC, 2022f). Resolution A/HRC/S-35/L.1 was adopted by a vote of 25 in favour, six against, and 16 abstentions (United Nations, 2022c). In its text, the UNHRC expresses severe concern over the grave violations of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, calling upon the Government of Iran to promote, protect and fulfil human rights, as well as to end the persistent discrimination against women and girls (UNHRC, 2022f).

The United States imposed sanctions against Iran's morality police on September 22nd, claiming its exclusive responsibility for Amini's death (CNBC, 2022). The sanctions further reach seven senior leaders in Iran's Government and security, senior leadership, and other leaders in Iran's security organisations (Nahvi, 2022). The US Treasury states that the officials and leaders designated include the morality police's head, the commander of the Iranian army's ground forces, Iran's minister of intelligence, the head of the morality police's Tehran division during Amini's detention and death, the deputy commander of Iran's hardline Basij militia, and members of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces. As such, according to the US, "all property and interests in property of those designated that fall under U.S. jurisdiction was blocked and must be reported to the Treasury", and added that "foreign financial institutions that knowingly facilitate a significant transaction or provide significant services for those sanctioned could be subject to U.S. penalties" (CNBC, 2022).

Similarly, the European Union imposed sanctions targeting 29 individuals and three entities, including asset freezes and travel bans. However, it is argued that the EU should do more, cutting off diplomatic ties, in order to increase political pressure (Askew, 2022).

Chapter 3

3. Most Recent Developments

As mentioned above, the current protests in Iran are of a revolutionary character. But what distinguishes them even further from previous similar waves is how much more prolonged the movement has been, and how it has reached and united every part of Iranian society (Askew, 2023). The “Woman. Life. Freedom.” movement has shifted from one ‘solely’ focused on women’s subordinate position in Iranian society and the workings of the morality police into an opportunity for the people of Iran to showcase their deep-rooted grievances of the State’s clerical leadership, especially in the wake of economic recession and continuous broken promises of democratic freedoms (Askew, 2023). Both women and men have been engaged, and for the first time dissent of the regime is heard in areas with much older and more conservative demographics (Askew, 2023). It seems that even traditionalists are changing their opinions due to the ongoing political death. Amini’s death was a catalyst for wider unrest in Iran, steered by long-standing discontent over issues of poverty, inequality, and corruption, uniting the people in their demand to overthrow the regime and establish a secular democracy as one of the biggest challenges to its theocracy in over four decades (IHRNGO, 2022).

Yet precisely this radical and revolutionary nature has given the Iranian government the impetus to do everything in its power to quell the protest. As mentioned before, as part of its draconian crackdown, the government has imposed capital punishment on individuals participating. As of January 2023, four young men have already been executed whilst 18 others have been sentenced to death after being charged by the Islamic Revolutionary Court with crimes of “waging war against God” (moharebeh) and “corruption on earth” (*efssfad-e fel-arz*) (Afshang, 2023; UN, 2022f). It is estimated that at least 100 people are currently facing death sentences (IHRNGO, 2022). Local and international human rights groups have also brought to the forefront how those in custody are victims of torture and sexual assault, and how the trials fall far from being fair and impartial where they rely on forced confessions and defendants are not given adequate legal representation (Afshang, 2023). Reports have also come out of individuals disproportionately being sentenced to prison after exercising their artistic freedoms through music, poetry, art, and film (OHCHR, 2023). One couple, for example, was sentenced to ten years in prison for dancing on the street (Moshtaghian, 2023). It is also important to note that this is not necessarily a surprising move by the Iranian government, which has tried to crack down on what it finds to be ‘Western’ action many times before, by arresting those dancing or listening to Western music as an “indecent act against public order” (Moshtaghian, 2023). The OHCHR has called upon Iran to abolish the death penalty, reminding the State that under international law it may only be imposed for the most serious of crimes (OHCHR, 2023). It further reminded the State that their violent crackdown on protests and artistic freedoms constitutes a serious violation of international human rights treaties to which the State is party.

As also highlighted above, the international community has taken many steps to show its concern over the current situation. In December 2022, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted a resolution to remove Iran from the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) for the remainder of its four-year term which was supposed to end in 2026 (UN, 2022g). CSW has become instrumental in promoting and documenting the global trend of women’s rights, and it is the first time ever a State is removed before the end of its elected term. Iran’s international relations have severely suffered under the governmental crackdown, most prominently with regards to the West, but this must also be viewed in the context of Iran’s general rejection of American/Western hegemony and its continued isolation from both regional and global politics (Ataman, 2022). The establishment of the UN fact-finding mission under resolution S35/1 was also met with great opposition on behalf of the Iranian Representa-

tive of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Khadijeh Karimi, who claimed that the State is being attacked by “arrogant” Member States even though they are committed to their obligations to protect human rights (OHCHR, 2022). A general rejection of international pressure is also felt in how the Iranian government demarcates protesters as terrorists indoctrinated by Western propaganda (UN HRC, 2022g). Finally, in January 2023, the European Parliament called for a motion to designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation on the EU’s sanctions list in hope to undermine the country’s ability to produce nuclear weapons or establish international ties (Foy et al., 2023). The EU has not yet approved of this.

Besides its international ties, the relationship between Iran and its people has also severely been hampered. Despite the fact that protests in the country have slowed since the first executions began and even though experts still do find it unlikely that the demonstrations will result in regime change (Al-Jazeera, 2023; NPR, 2023; Shanahan, 2022), it is undeniable that the grip of authoritative power has been undermined by months of unrest. In December 2022, attorney general Mohammad Jafar Montazeri’s statement that “the morality police have been shut down from where they were set up” led to much national and international confusion. Some interpreted it as a win that the police had been abolished, but the refusal of Iranian authorities to confirm this resulted in walkouts and increased protests in 40 cities across the country (Wintour & Foumani, 2022). It has now been established that the statement came as a political stunt of the government in an effort to quell the protests, of which nothing more can be deduced than that the morality police has no direct relationship to the national judiciary (Rajvanshi, 2023; Wintour & Foumani, 2022). Witnesses have still reported a decrease in the police’s presence on the streets; but this may be attributed to the fact that, in the face of unrest, authorities’ main priority would not lay with regulating women’s dress code. Of course, its abolition would count as a win for protesters, but the fact that they are increasingly irrelevant first highlights how deep rooted the other grievances protests are trying to tackle are, and secondly demonstrates that the abovementioned claim was a desperate move to address the people’s grievances (Reuters, 2023). The police’s current irrelevance in the country made it an easy statement to make as an empty promise of a dictatorship slowly losing its grip on power.

One more such political stunt came on the eve on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in February 2023, when Iran’s supreme leader announced with a recommendation of the judiciary that he would issue pardons to thousands of prisoners, among whom many linked to the protests (Reuters, 2023). This was the first time the leader admitted to having arrested a substantial number of protesters; current estimates lay around 20,000 (IHRNGO, 2023). He stated that pardons will be granted to those who are willing to apologise for partaking in anti-government demonstrations, but they will not be extended to those accused of cooperating with foreign agents or to those facing the death sentence. This clearly comes off the back of protests slowing down in the country (in the aftermath of the executions starting) as a move of the government to re-impose its power and exercise its authority over dissenting individuals. In a public letter, the judiciary framed protesters as deeply regretful of their actions which were inspired by Western propaganda and indoctrination (Reuters, 2023). According to Thijs Reuten, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, this move might be considered a manoeuvre of the State to regain legitimacy in the eyes of its people, and it continues to violate the human rights of prisoners whose freedom is made conditional on the wishes of the dictator (IIN, 2023). National fear and discontent, combined with international pressure on the human rights situation, have placed Iran in a compromising situation, which it is currently trying to climb out by making empty promises and offering shallow solutions to years of discontent.

The question remains, what will come next? Have these demonstrations proven successful in advancing

ing women's rights in the country or, taking it one step further, in toppling the regime for the wish of democratic freedom? Iran's regime is experienced in shutting down anti-government sentiment, which it has demonstrated yet again with its violent crackdown. Although this wave of protests is unprecedented on its scale and reach, as well as its ability to reach the international community, opinions diverge on whether protesters will be successful in their eventual goal (Shanahan, 2022). As Baram (2022) illustrates, certain concrete elements are lacking to ensure regime change, such as the fact that the protests are disorganised and leaderless, critical industries are continuing as usual, and no split in the top of the regime is visible (yet). However, Iranian women and the Iranian people have demonstrated time and again that they will continue to fight for their rights in the face of repression. History has shown us that demonstrations can and do achieve fundamental change. Perhaps Iran will learn that the *raison d'état* has precedence over Islamic first step, maybe by first recognising that the hijab is not part of Islamic law (Baram, 2022). If anything, these demonstrations have shown the world that as long as the State does not address the real grievances of its people, the people will continue to protest and fight for their human rights.

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