

DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

The Growing Resistance of Women: Is Autocratic Façade Weakening in Iran?

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Thousands of Iranians have flooded the streets of Iran following the [tragic death](#) of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian whom Iran’s morality police had arrested for violating the mandatory veiling law. While in custody for “[inappropriate attire](#)” —showing too much hair under her hijab— she was severely beaten and was hospitalized with a serious brain injury that left her in a coma. She died three days later, on September 16.

Amini’s death sparked the first women-led movement in modern Iranian history. People from all walks of life chant “[Women, Life, Liberty](#)” on the streets to demand socio-economic and civil reforms for women and their freedom of choice after decades of oppression. Through social media campaigns, many women and girls have posted videos of themselves [burning their hijabs](#) or cutting off their hair. These brave acts of defiance quickly captured the world’s attention. [Rallies and demonstrations](#) in support of the Iranian women’s cause have been held in cities from Los Angeles to Sydney and from Tunis to Tokyo. The hashtag [#منیما اسهم](#) (#MahsaAmini in Persian) has been used in more than 274 million tweets, breaking historic records.

Although centered on women’s freedom, the protests reflect the people’s deeper grievances with the country’s leadership and the despotism it perpetuates. The roots of unrest sprouted decades ago against economic stagnation, unfair treatment, corruption, and many more issues. Women have been struggling with strict policies that greatly imperil their rights in marriage, inheritance, employment, political office, health care, and other areas. They may be leading this movement, but Iranian women have long been raising their voices against gender-based discrimination and totalitarian repression.

As history reflects, misogynistic Iranian rulers have used religion —and specifically the hijab— as a means to control society. Although they enjoyed significant rights under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from 1941 to 1979, women partook in the Islamic Revolution that [toppled](#) the Shah’s secular repressive regime. Hope for change, however, was short-lived. The new Islamic regime led by fundamentalist Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini quickly imposed severe restrictions aimed at controlling social life and subordinating women. Khomeini [declared](#) that he wished to suspend the 1967 Family Protection Law —and the subsequent 1975 amendment which mandated more equal rights for women in marriage, divorce, and child custody— and enforce mandatory veiling.

Fearful that their efforts would be in vain, tens of thousands of women staged [protests](#) alongside men just a few weeks after the revolution; however, they could not stop Khomeini’s agenda. For the next three decades or so, Iranian women faced harsh repressions. The regime implemented brutal punishments for anyone who opposed its strict codes of behavior. Women were slowly stripped of the public sphere —the street, parks, city councils, the parliament, and more— and denied access to various rights.

The first popular uprising after the Islamic Revolution was in 2009 in what was known as the [Green Movement](#). Millions of Iranians marched in the streets to protest the fraudulent presidential elections that returned hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to office. Women of all backgrounds were at the forefront, at times outnumbering men. As the protestors’ demands grew to include democratic justice and reform of the country’s governing system, the regime brutally suppressed the movement. [Hundreds](#) were beaten up, arrested and killed, and a plethora of women activists, journalists, and reformists was pushed into exile.

The last decade saw an increase in women’s organized resistance to rights violations and the hijab mandate. They created civil disobedience campaigns such as [My Stealthy Freedom](#), where women posted photos of themselves bareheaded on social media. In 2017, hundreds of women participated in the [White Wednesdays](#) campaign by wearing white hijabs or white clothing as a symbol of protest. Inspired by an Iranian woman named Vida Movahed, who was arrested but [pardoned](#) for waving her hijab above her unveiled head, brave Iranian women once again took to the streets of Tehran in 2018 to protest the strict dress code —what is

known as the [Girls of Revolution Street](#) campaign. The government responded with arrests and long prison sentences. Iran's current extremist president, Ebrahim Raisi, has cracked down on opposition since [taking office](#) in 2021, focusing on Iranians' civil rights, specifically on hijab, in response to women's ongoing resistance.

As protests over Amini's death intensified across Iran and made headlines in global news media, the regime once again launched a disruption-and-intimidation campaign. Over the past few weeks, security forces have brutally cracked down on the throngs of protestors, [using](#) tear gas and live ammunition, arrests, beatings, and killings to quell the uprising. Reportedly, the [civilian death toll](#) has increased to more than 200. The government implemented a widespread [Internet shutdown](#) along with restrictions on social media to halt online activism. Yet, the popular outrage against the government has not been stemmed. The protests are only growing as Iranians express their anger and loss of patience in the face of patriarchal oppression and corrupt theocracy.

Today, women are the most vocal, dynamic group in opposition politics in Iran. Both outside and within the government, they have been strategizing to gain their freedom of choice and rightful place in society. They have been defying gender-based stereotypes by refusing to become voiceless, invisible, and powerless. They have been shaping and influencing democratic aspirations in Iran by peacefully standing up to the police, security forces, and even the regime over decades.

It is still early to predict whether current uprisings will result in major concessions from the government. The Islamic Republic has shown to be highly immune to change and meaningful reforms despite a lot of pressure from the Iranian people, especially women. On the other hand, women and men continue their fights for democracy despite live ammunition, arrests, torture, and executions.

The autocratic façade may not be weakening just yet. However, women have already become the pioneers of a broader movement for freedom, democracy, and rule of law in Iran.

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