

Iran's Harsh Crackdown on Protests is Unlikely to Silence Calls for "Women, Life, and Freedom".

By Shada Islam – Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

As they have done in the past, Iranian authorities are using brutal force against anti-government protesters who have taken to the streets following the death of Mahsa Amini while in custody of Iran's morality police. Yet their attempts to silence calls for "women, life, freedom" will be no easy task.

The government's tough reaction to the ongoing public unrest is no surprise. Iran's security apparatus has a long and sordid history of cracking down hard against anti-government demonstrations. Also, much to the consternation of the hardliners in power, what began as women-led protests against the mandatory wearing of the hijab and a "hijab and chastity" decree has quickly morphed into a wider, deeper and seemingly unexpectedly powerful challenge to the government.

In a repetition of their actions in 2009, when hundreds of thousands of Iranians, predominantly students, protested election results and once again in 2019, when demonstrations broke out over a government hike in the price of gasoline, Iran's hardliners are showing no signs of backing down. So far neither are the protesters.

As Iranian women took to the streets and the internet to burn their headscarves and cut their hair, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, speaking in New York, promised that Amini's death would "certainly be investigated". But the hardline president also warned that Iran would not tolerate "acts of chaos".

Since then, the Internet has been shut off in parts of Tehran and the Kurdistan region and access to platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp has been blocked. The Iranian judiciary has ordered the courts to take a tough line with protesters, claiming the demonstrators are being led by foreign agents. Ominously, the Iranian army has said it will "confront the enemies" to ensure security.

The strength and size of Iran's security apparatus is certainly indisputable but so is the level of public anger and frustration. The unprecedented scale and intensity of popular anger - and the unexpected audacity of the protests - suggests that unrest in Iran is likely to grow, not diminish, in the grim weeks ahead.

In the past, protesters were often divided and pitted against each other. Those in the streets today, appear to be more united and bolder. Young men, conservative women, older people - all frustrated by years of economic hardship, angry at corruption and desperate for change - are revolting together.

Their fury is understandable. Iranians are beset by rising unemployment and inflation. Efforts at reforming a system widely criticized as corrupt have been stymied. Economic isolation triggered by US sanctions is one cause of the collapsed economy. Negotiations between Washington, Tehran, and Europe to return to the 2015 nuclear deal and repeal many of those sanctions remain stalled, however.

Unlike in the past, calls for political change are getting stronger and the "regime is literally pushing people to choose revolt over reform", according to Trita Parsi of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a US think tank.

Strikingly, women are continuing to play a prominent role in the demonstrations, their anger at Iran's compulsory strict hijab requirements now reignited by Amini's death for being seen in "unsuitable attire".

International condemnation of Iran's brutal response to the protests has been slow. But UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for "a prompt, impartial and effective investigation" into Amini's death by an "independent competent authority."

In a belated EU reaction, High Representative Josep Borrell has warned that the bloc will consider "all options at its disposal" at the next meeting of EU foreign ministers to address both the killing of Mahsa Amini and the way Iranian security forces have responded to the ensuing demonstrations.

The US has imposed sanctions on the morality police "for abuse and violence against Iranian women and the violation of the rights of peaceful Iranian protestors."

Do not expect these and other statements to prompt any course correction in Tehran, however. The government, as always, has said protesters are working with Iran's enemies.

Grand statements from western leaders are therefore likely to either fall on deaf ears or, worse still, make the hardliners more determined to pursue an even harsher course, especially at a time when the country is braced for a potential leadership transition due to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's uncertain health.

President Raisi has already called out Western "double standards" on human rights while other critics – justifiably – point out the hypocrisy of those who are calling for the freedom of Iranian women to dress as they like while setting strict sartorial norms for Muslim women who live in other Middle Eastern nations, as well as in India, France, and other European countries.

Additionally, as is the case for women in Afghanistan, many are quite rightly uneasy at the West's repeated reinforcement of Orientalist tropes which focus on the need to "save Muslim women".

Iran is certainly not the only country which imposes dress codes on women. But its compulsory imposition of the hijab is particularly draconian. Human rights groups say that every year millions of women are stopped and harassed for "improper hijab", and many are believed to be serving prison sentences for refusing to follow orders.

Often lost in the turmoil is the striking fact that most Iranian women are not demanding an end to the hijab, but to its compulsory imposition.

Iran faces tough weeks ahead. The country's hardline leaders may be able to shrug off global consternation at their brutal repression of the ongoing protests. And as the security forces ramp up their crackdown on protesters, there may even be a temporary lull in the angry demonstrations.

The writing is on the wall, however. Protesters' cries of "women, life, freedom" are likely to echo across the country for some time to come - and become increasingly difficult to silence.

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