

Islamic regime shaken by unprecedented revolt

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Protests in Iran erupted on Friday 16 September after the death in police custody of Mahsa-Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman. She had been arrested on Tuesday 13 by the morality police for a few strands of supposedly “indecent” hair protruding from her Islamic dress, in application of article 638 of the penal code of the Islamic Republic.

Women were at the forefront of the first protests, cutting their hair and burning their headscarves in public in defiance of the hijab law. Unlike the individual initiatives of 2017-2018, this time removing one's headscarf is done collectively, leading to a direct confrontation with the authorities.

A women's revolt that comes from afar

Compulsory veil-wearing is one of the ideological foundations of this patriarchal and theocratic regime. It was imposed by force on women despite their huge mobilizations in 1979 to oppose it. After 43 years of protest, feminist demands are now coming to the forefront of the political and social demands put forward in the demonstrations.

Part of the depth of women's current refusal is that they are present in all spheres of social, political and economic life. Almost all of them are literate and have a level of education at least equal to that of men. Nevertheless, they have great difficulty in finding a job and are therefore confined to the home.

The average number of children per woman is 1.6. In response, the law of 15 November 2021 criminalizes abortion. It also considerably restricts access to contraception and vasectomy. At the same time, the regime encourages early marriage before the age of 15.

For the past ten years, women have been investing in internet communication. They have multiplied blogs and online videos. In the months leading up to Masha Amini's death, women converged on anti-hijab protest hashtags, posting videos of themselves walking with their heads uncovered or being harassed in the street.

The strength of Kurdish resistance to oppression

As early as 18 September, protests broke out in Mahsa-Jina Amini's native Iranian Kurdistan. General strikes were organized there from Monday 19. Hostility towards the regime is traditionally strong in this part of the country where the population is particularly oppressed. Aspiring to autonomy and democracy, they were among the first forces of opposition to the Islamic regime. Repression is particularly fierce there: a good part of the political prisoners in Iran come from there.

Social and geographical extension of the mobilizations

Starting with women, the movement very quickly spread to the student world. It reached out to other young city dwellers, but also to older people.

All the unions and associations not recognized by the government openly supported the movement. For example, on 17 September, the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Workers' Union (VAHED) declared that it "strongly condemns this crime" and "demands prosecution, a public trial and punishment of all those responsible for the murder of Mahsa Amini. The structural, institutionalized and patriarchal discrimination against girls and women in the country must end."

The protest quickly led to a growing number of demonstrations across the country, burning up as many as 100 cities in a week, including all the major ones. In the face of this, the repression has so far resulted in more than 50 deaths, hundreds of injuries and thousands of arrests across the country.

A rapid politicization of the movement

The initial slogans, generally directed against the morality police, were very quickly enriched by mass chants such as: "Death to the dictator", "Down with the Islamic Republic", "No Shah, no Supreme Guide", "Woman, Life, Freedom", or "Bread, Work, Freedom". The movement was highly politicized from the start, and it was no longer a purely protest movement.

A long-standing resistance to the regime and its neoliberal policies

The rapid politicization of the current movement is not surprising. Indeed, the rupture between the regime and the population is total. According to polls conducted by state institutions, only 12-14 per cent of the population is in favour of the regime. The regime thought it could consolidate its reign by pushing aside the "reformist" tendencies embodied by former presidents Khatami and Rouhani. He designated Ebrahim Raiisi, considered by human rights organizations as guilty of crimes against humanity. Far from "responding to the country's problems", his policy has led to an unprecedented social crisis: galloping inflation, mass unemployment, increasing insecurity and impoverishment of the majority of the population: according to official statistics, 50 per cent of the Iranian population lives below the poverty line.

For several years, Iran has been regularly shaken by popular uprisings of varying degrees, but most often based on a set of social, economic and environmental demands. These mobilizations are opposed to the neoliberal policies implemented by all the successive governments of the Islamic Republic since the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).

To mention just a few, the revolts of 2017 and 2019 were violently repressed in blood. According to some sources, more than 1,500 people were killed in 2019. Arrests and continuous harassment of activists in the trade union, student and feminist movements have been the only responses of the regime, without any social proposals. This repression has not prevented 4122 protest movements and actions, strikes, sit-ins, by workers, teachers and other employees, as well as pensioners, from taking place last year. An absolute record in the history of the Islamic Republic. The workers' movement's response to President Raisi's rule. The high point of this response was last summer's major strike by workers in the oil and petrochemicals industry, when more than 100,000 workers in this sector responded to the call to mobilise.

Iran has been the scene of water revolts, notably in Khuzestan (2021), Isfahan and Shahrekord (2022), which quickly took a political turn and were repressed.

The manœuvres of those nostalgic for the Shah's dictatorship

After the total failure of the "reformist current inside the state" and its discredit among the vast majority of the population, a campaign was led by the major media in exile, some of which were supported and financed directly by the Gulf monarchies and their US sponsors. Using a few isolated slogans chanted during the two previous revolts, they presented the son of the Shah (overthrown in the 1979 revolution) as the "symbol of the unity of the people". They tried to present him as the embodiment of a "return to Iran's monarchical roots". Their campaign was amplified by the strength of their large-scale means of communication, and via viral actions in social media.

However, as of 25 September, after 9 days of nationwide revolt, at no time has such a colouring of the demonstrations been heard or observed, either among the mobilized citizens, or among the organizers and major actors of the collective actions. Moreover, the slogans chanted show precisely the absence of such an orientation. This is a victory for the living, progressive forces in Iran.

This ongoing revolt is a higher stage of the struggle of the women and men of Iran in their quest for democracy and social justice. No Shah, No Supreme Leader!

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P.S.

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