

Why Iran's Anti-Hijab Movement Failed?

Fraz Naqvi*

Anti-Hijab protests that erupted in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini death engulfed Iran's entire geographical, political and social landscape. The impact of these protests also fractured Iran's external relations. The aforesaid is evident from the fact that EU, which was spearheading the Vienna Talks, itself imposed many sanctions on Iran citing human rights, freedom, regime suppression and other factors. Additionally, the international media dedicated much coverage to these protests in a manner that was seemingly sympathetic towards the protestors. Overall, the intensity of these protests in over 40 years of Iranian Revolution, is unprecedented and only aligns with the Green Movement of 2009 to some extent. However, given all the coverage, support by every segment of global civil society and the statements by the western states' officials, the success of these protests in achieving their objectives is rather minimal. There are a plethora of reasons for this. Some of the main underlying reasons are as follows:

Leaderless Movement

The foremost reason is the unavailability of any leader in the movement. It was initially argued that since the protests were abrupt and spontaneous, featuring a wide spectrum of the society, particularly the youth, the leader(s) would eventually emerge in due course. Many western analysts synonymize these protests with the Arab Spring of 2011 in which despite the absence of any leader, the protesters were able to bring political change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. Nonetheless, the case of Iran is different. Not only Iran has a thriving economy despite sanctions but it also features the ideological base. Both of these factors consolidate the state apparatus of the country. Hence, to challenge the existing status-quo, it was imperative on the behalf of protestors to synchronize and coordinate the

protests in different cities which, eventually, did not materialize.

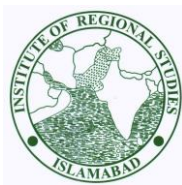
Anarchy and Violence

Mahsa Amini's demise was shrouded in mystery, especially given her death while under police custody, the public outrage was natural. Like in any other state where the masses show their discontent over certain policies of the state, the Iranian people came out to streets to protest against the Morality Police (MP). Furthermore, due to the controversial role of MP during the Green Movement of 2009 and mass protests of 2017, 2018 and 2019, the distrust was already prevalent between the institution and the public. Resultantly, the initial mass protests and the attempts of curtailing them by the police transformed into violent clashes. On 22 September 2022, protestors burnt down various vehicles and police institutions in different cities.¹ According to reports over 20 members of Iran's security institutions had been killed while 185 protestors died during the protests till October 2022.² Weeks later, an IRGC Commander, Amir Hajizadeh, announced that over 300 people had been "martyred and killed" during the protests.³ Due to such violence, the peaceful protests turned into *riots* which kept ordinary protesters away from such events and hence, the momentum of the anti-Hijab movement declined over time.

Islamophobic Element

Hijab is invariably regarded as an Islamic symbol even beyond the ambit of compulsory anti-hijab laws. This is evident through the Islamophobic incidents that occurred around the globe over Hijab. France was the first country in 2011 that banned full-face veil followed by other European countries like Belgium and Austria.⁴ In 2022, EU's top court ruled the imposition of anti-hijab laws in workspaces.⁵

* The author is working as the Assistant Research Officer with the Iran Program at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.



Though Islamophobia accelerated mainly after 9/11 attacks, yet its current wave in Europe is largely attributed to the ISIS attacks and the immigrants' influx from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Additionally, another major factor behind the renewed wave of Islamophobia can be attributed to the rise of far-right groups and leaders in Europe and generally around the globe. In India, for example, the Hijab controversy engulfed the entire country after a college in Karnataka disallowed the entrance of Muslim (hijab-clad) girls into the classrooms. As the nationwide protests intensified, the matter was taken to India's Supreme Court which remained inconclusive due to absence of consensus among the judges.⁶

Under these circumstances, the global outrage against Iran's compulsory Hijab Laws is also viewed by some segments as the depiction of Islamophobia. The view got further consolidated by an additional trend of 'Turban Tossing'. Turban (usually either black or white) is a religious attire that signifies the status of any individual in terms of his religious soundness. Some of the youth, in order to record their protests against the Islamic system of Iran, started to randomly throw off turbans of the clergy members indiscriminately and widely circulated it on social media.⁷ It is noteworthy that clergy do not belong to any one political faction of Iran instead, they have presence in multiple groups and factions. Most of the moderates and reformists are, in fact, clergy members like former presidents Hasan Rouhani and Muhammad Khatami, respectively. Therefore, this trend where delegitimized the anti-hijab movement, also lessened its political support. Moreover, it further kept an ordinary Iranian at distance with the anti-Hijab movement since clergy is not only a political force but is also regarded as the religious guide and is, therefore, highly revered within the country.

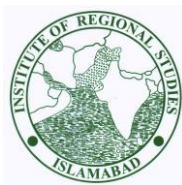
Biased and Fake Reporting

When it comes to Iran, one of the major factor that shapes and reshapes the country's perception is the narrative that the media portrays. While it is a fact that majority of the Iranian media outlets favor the regime's policies, it is also true that

many western news agencies and leaders propagate false news against Iran. This can be understood the analysis of reporting of 15000 executions that were reported to be carried out by Iranian authorities in the wake of anti-Hijab protests. The news got widely circulated on social media to the extent that various celebrities and leaders reposted it on their social media accounts. Canadian PM, Justin Trudeau, also tweeted this on his twitter handle. However, at the end, the news turned out to be false.⁸ In another instance, The New York Times, reported that Iranian leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, had cancelled all the public appearances due to poor health.⁹ The very next day, on September 17, 2022, Khamenei made the public appearance in a religious event. Finally, the international media was also accused of not broadcasting or downplaying the incidents of violence carried out by the protestors, hence, reflecting the biases in the reporting.¹⁰ Due to such reporting, the depiction of Iran in the western media outlets becomes dubious and the credibility of the news gets challenged. It is believed that many a times, when it comes to Iran, instead of reporting the ground realities, western media often spreads propaganda. Therefore, the aforementioned incidents led to the lessening of global support to Iranian protests.

Foreign Involvement and Anti-West Rhetoric

Another major reason that affected the momentum of anti-hijab movement in Iran was the accusation(s) that the protests were ignited by the foreign powers. The interior minister also blamed the foreign states in inciting the violence inside Iran.¹¹ While it is yet to be determined whether any western hand was involved in these protests, it is noteworthy that the paranoia of Iranians regarding the western involvement has a deep-rooted history. The 1953 coup that led to the overthrow of Iran's nationalist PM, Mohammad Mossadegh, was orchestrated by both the US and UK intelligence agencies. Similarly, more recently, in 2018, the then US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, delivered a speech which gained widespread attention as being tantamount to US desire for the regime change in Iran.¹² Likewise,



many western policymakers articulate writings which somehow, reflect their involvement in the protests. For example, an article published in a European think tank suggests possible measures to support Iran's protests through strengthening and coordinating with the civil society of the country.¹³ Such incidents create doubts over the organic nature of the Iranian protests. Though the direct support or funding of the western states to Iranian protests is less likely, these indirect means of narrative-building against Iran harvest more anti-Western sentiments within the Iranian people. Anti-Westernism or more specifically, anti-Americanism within Iran is deep-rooted. Though it has historical roots yet, more recent incidents reaffirm such feelings, for instance, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, assassination of Qassem Soleimani, and US threats of military operation against Iran, particularly under Trump Administration. Therefore, despite sharing the grievances against their own government, the Iranian people do not look towards the West as an alternative and could very well reject any Western solution to their own problems, including the Hijab laws. More particularly, the open support by the western scholars, media and leaders to the anti-Hijab movement led many people to dissociate themselves from the protests to avoid even a minute possibility of acting upon western agenda against Iran.

Lack of Political Support

Both internally and regionally, Iranian protests generated little support from the political factions. Internally, the conservative and hardline factions reflected total opposition towards anti-Hijab movement primarily due to aforementioned reasons. From the reformist and moderate factions as well, the movement could not amass popular support. Majority of the moderate and reformist politicians inside Iran chose to remain silent on these protests while others like Mir Hossein Mousavi and Ali Larijani only expressed their concerns over the handling of the protests by the security forces.¹⁴ At the regional level, despite sharing resentments with Iran, the response from the Arab and Gulf States over Iran's protests remained largely muted. This is because of

the fact that any disruption within Iran could result in a spillover like that of Arab Spring 2011 and would threaten the monarchies of the Middle East. Therefore, lack of internal and regional support is also a factor behind the weakening of anti-Hijab movement.

Conclusion

Iran's anti-Hijab movement has generated a lot of support in recent years. However, each time the movement failed to achieve its objectives. This time, many western scholars believed that the movement would bring both the social and political change within Iran, however, with the passage of time, it wandered away as well. As the signs of its weakening became apparent, articles in the western media discussing the reasons why the movement would result in a 'revolution' or 'regime change' inside Iran began to appear. The issue lies not in the essence of the movement but how it is portrayed. What the western scholars fail to analyze is the social, cultural and religious significance of hijab within the confines of Iran. Furthermore, instead of observing the protests like that in any other country, western scholars rush to conclude every demonstration inside Iran as a threat to the regime. More than the Hijab issue, the main objective of this particular anti-Hijab movement was to investigate the death of Mahsa Amini and the role of Morality Police. It is noteworthy to consider that the institution of Morality Police was only established in 2005 and since then, its role has remained controversial. Furthermore, the reason why this incident generated huge support within Iran initially was the fact that the Iranian youth was frustrated over the government's economic and financial policies and this particular incident provided them the platform to express their discontent with the government. However, it should be considered that many Iranians still consider the US as the main culprit behind their economic woes due to sanctions. Conclusively, these protests inside Iran are likely to reoccur in the future as well, nevertheless, the compromise, if it is made, would most probably be the dissolution of Morality Police in the future while the Hijab laws are likely to remain in place.

Notes and References

- ¹ "Events in Iran since Mahsa Amini's arrest and death in custody," *Reuters*, 12 December 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/events-iran-since-mahsa-aminis-arrest-death-custody-2022-10-05/>.
- ² Alexandra Fouché, "Protests in Iran: Two members of security forces killed," *BBC*, 9 October 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63191717>.
- ³ Maziar Motamedi, "Iran says more than 200 killed in country's continuing unrest," *Al Jazeera*, 3 December 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/3/iran-says-over-200-killed-in-countrys-ongoing-unrest>.
- ⁴ "The Islamic Veil Across Europe," *BBC*, 31 May 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13038095>.
- ⁵ MEE Staff, "Workplaces can impose hijab bans, rules top EU court," *Middle East Eye*, 14 October 2022. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/european-union-workplace-can-impose-hijab-ban-court-ruling>.
- ⁶ Suchitra Mohanty and Shilpa Jamkhandikar, "Indian Supreme Court panel divided over school hijab ban," *Reuters*, 13 October 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/panel-indias-top-court-split-decision-allow-hijab-classrooms-2022-10-13/>.
- ⁷ "Tossing Turbans Of Clerics Becomes A New Protest Act In Iran," *Iran International*, 8 November 2022. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211083679>.
- ⁸ Maziar Motamedi, "Fact check: Has Iran sentenced 15,000 protesters to death?" *Al Jazeera*, 16 November 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/16/have-15000-protesters-been-sentenced-to-death-in-iran-explainer>.
- ⁹ Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran's Supreme Leader Cancels Public Appearances After Falling Ill," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/middleeast/irans-supreme-leader-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-ill.html>.
- ¹⁰ AFP, "Iran criticises world 'silence' over protest violence," *Dawn News*, 19 November 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1721868/iran-criticises-world-silence-over-protest-violence>.
- ¹¹ "Foreign States Funding Rioters across Iran: Interior Minister," *Tasnim News Agency*, 14 October 2022. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/10/14/2787903/foreign-states-funding-rioters-across-iran-interior-minister>.
- ¹² James Dobbins, "Regime Change in Iran: Watch What You Ask For," *Rand Corporation*, 2 August 2018. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/08/regime-change-in-iran-watch-what-you-ask-for.html>.
- ¹³ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Three ways European governments can support Iranian protesters," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 December 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/article/three-ways-european-governments-can-support-iranian-protesters/>.
- ¹⁴ Patrick Wintour, "Cracks appear among Iran elite as senior figure calls for hijab policing rethink," *The Guardian*, 12 October 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/12/iran-hijab-law-protest-ali-larijani>.