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Abstract

The ongoing protests in Iran, which began following the death of Mahsa Amini, present a significant challenge to the post-revolutionary regime. The protests have not diminished despite violent suppression efforts by the establishment, and there are several distinguishing features of the current unrest compared to past protests, including a different timeline, younger protestors, ethnic segmentation, and the demographic and geographical distribution of the demonstrations. The ongoing unrest is viewed as a challenge to the regime's revolutionary concept that serves as an ideological compass.

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The social protests, which began following Mahsa Amini's death, pose an ongoing challenge to the post-revolutionary regime. At first glance one can observe a high level of anger and disappointment accumulated in various segments of the Iranian society. As a result, the young Kurdish woman became an icon and a symbol in Iran and abroad. The social uproar, which began on September 16, 2022, encountered a violent response from the establishment, which resulted in many victims and detainees.

Despite the regime's efforts, the social unrest did not diminish up to this moment, and the security establishment has failed to suppress it. The regime's failure to stop the uproar as fast as they have been able to in the past demonstrates the unique characteristics of the current social protests compared to previous ones. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will analyze the differences between the Hijab protest and previous protests in Iran and how they require a new framework for understanding social processes within its society.

There are four prominent features of the current protests: a) the timeline, b) the protestors' age, c) the ethnic segmentation, and d) the demographic and geographical distribution of the demonstrations. This generation has an ongoing dispute on various

principles of the Islamic republic's system of government. It is worth mentioning that the basic discourse of the Islamic government relies on two main components: 1. divine legitimacy entrusted in the hands of the Supreme Leader. 2. The republican feature reflected in presidential elections and several other governing bodies. The republican feature has weakened significantly in the past two decades due to Khamenei's worldview and his striving for the status of an absolute ruler.

Scholars have dealt with the "similarities and alterations" of this social unrest vis-à-vis its predecessors. More than once, these intellectuals questioned whether to classify it as the beginning of a revolution. This theme necessitates a thorough evaluation of various facets, including the magnitude of frustration prevalent in the society, the composition of protesters and leadership traits, the approach used to handle the conflict, and the region where the struggle occurs.

Concurrently, a deep contemplation of various aspects of Iran's foreign relations and their impact on the regime's decision making process is essential. The evaluation of the struggle's endurance in relation to the means of oppression employed by the establishment is crucial in this case. During more than four decades, there has been a great amount of anger among Iran's civil population. This unrest intensified due to the incompetence to meet the commitment of the revolution's instigator (Ayatollah Khomeini), who promised that Islam would solve all society's miseries.

Moreover, the economic distress of Iran's population cannot be relieved by the hybrid economic system led by the administration. The rising costs of household consumption, unemployment, prolonged inflation, and the lack of basic infrastructure constitute an obstacle to national identification and social cohesion.

The desire to impose Islamic values through various means, which led to the death of the young Iranian-Kurdish woman, increased frustration and unrest. As a result, a large portion of the population, with an emphasis on the younger generation, does not identify itself with the principles of the current system of government. Their worldview differs, in various ways, from that of the masterminds of the Islamic revolution at the time. This generation was born long after the revolution (in many cases, even their parents were born after it) and did not consider itself a partner in its values.¹

The social class mentioned above strives for freedom, quality of life, employment, and education and constantly interacts with its affiliates in the global realm.² Furthermore, they maintain an open discourse that reflects and examines their situation through social media and networks. The intensity of anger and frustration increases enormously due to cognitive measures carried out by the regime to assimilate the ideology of the "rule of the jurist".

Following five months of struggle, a brighter picture emerges of the struggle's

1 . Over seventy percent of the population was born after 1979. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/#people-and-society>. Retrieved, 03.02.2023.

2 . The slogan of the Hijab protest is "Woman, Life, and Liberty".

characteristics. Currently, the volume of the protests has declined but did not extinguish because of the resistance's crystallization in different geographical areas at varying periods. These occurrences persist, despite the numerous means utilized by the establishment to eliminate them. According to unverified data released by an Iranian human rights organization (based in Norway), the number of fatalities stands at about 500 people, and another 107 against whom a death sentence is pending.³ However, it has been estimated that the numbers are much higher than the figure presented, which did not include the number of injured and arrested.

Media Sources indicate that the province with the highest number of fatalities is Sistan and Baluchistan. This province, located in southeastern Iran, hosts high numbers of the Sunni-Baluchi population, oppressed by the Shiite majority.⁴ Other provinces with many fatalities are West Azerbaijan, Tehran, Kurdistan, and Mazandaran. Moreover, an article published on BBC's Farsi website indicates that killings occurred in 25 of Iran's 31 provinces. This implies that the protests are not local and not confined to main cities or populated urban areas.

The ethnic component indicates dissatisfaction and growing distress of Iran's minorities (ethnic and religious). One may recall that Iran is not a unified entity, and its population contains various ethnic minorities such as Kurdish Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs, Lurs, and more. Iran's history is replete with ethno-national's aspirations and struggles. Examples are the uprising of the Azeri minority and later of the Kurdish minority during the 20th century.⁵

Moreover, the massive presence of women is another important factor in differentiating between the present and past protests. Contrary to past protests, Women are a leading force in the current ones. Mahsa Amini did not just become a symbol in Iran itself but influenced circles of consciousness beyond Iran's borders. The participation of women in Iran's protests is not a new phenomenon, but the difference now is that gender has become a significant factor.

The lack of a charismatic leader is considered a weak point in the current protest. That is because affiliation and solidarity are perceived to be of paramount significance for the development of any protest aimed at making a regime change. Therefore, a civil struggle without a charismatic leader will end up dissipating. This was the case with the "fuel protests," which erupted intensively in November 2019. A similar case took place a decade earlier, with the arrest of the leaders of the Green Movement, which opposed Ahmadinejad's reelection for a second term as president.

For comparison, the "fuel protest" were characterized by riots that were concentrated in

3 . <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-64434052>. Retrieved, 28.12.2023.

4 . <https://www.mei.edu/blog/irans-regime-plays-fire-baluchistan>. Retrieved, 04.02.2023.

5 . Conflicting Interests: Tehran and the National Aspirations of the Iraqi Kurds, Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 142. <https://besacenter.org/iran-iraq-kurds/>, Retrieved, 03.02.2023.

the main cities, with an emphasis on the capital, Tehran. The reason that aroused the ire of the citizens at the time was the regime's decision to raise fuel prices by fifty percent. These protests were accompanied by strong anti-establishment chants and anger, articulated by burning gas stations, banks, and public buildings. The "fuel protest" was fierce in intensity but lasted for a relatively short period. In contrast, the current unrest is characterized by less intensity but greater continuity and geographical dispersion.

On the other hand, the success of the Islamic revolution to overthrow the monarchy in early 1979 was a result of strong leadership. The rebellion that ended the rule of the Pahlavis was promoted and directed by Ayatollah Khomeini. From Najaf, he was able to attract a congregation of believers from all layers of Iran's society. The success of that revolution requires distinguishing whether, this time, the protesters' intention is a fundamental change of the regime or alternatively, they intend to carry out reforms only. The answer is unclear, given that there is a division between those who demand regime change and those seeking reforms that will improve their situation.

The geopolitical component deserves attention due to its ramifications on the decision-making of the Supreme Leader and his confidants. In their view, assisting Russia in the war against Ukraine and strengthening trade ties with China serves as a bargaining chip in the domestic domain. This practice sees a direct correlation between strengthening Iran's geopolitical status and suppressing domestic unrest and branding it as a pawn in the hands of the West. This implies a clear connection between Khamenei's uncompromising position and what he perceives as strengthening Iran in the international arena.

Nevertheless, the ouster of Hossein Ashtari, the commander of the Iranian law enforcement force (Faraja), indicates the Supreme Leader's dissatisfaction. Ashtari's replacement with Ahmadreza Radan enables us to understand the embarrassment of the Iranian establishment over the length of time the social protests have been underway. It is worth noting that law enforcement agencies have become a symbol of repression for the people of Iran.⁶ One may conclude that citizens, who see themselves as living on the margins, do not hesitate to confront the regime, despite the rigid image that accompanies it.

The establishment's modus operandi deserves an examination, as it encompasses similar characteristics that constitute the regime's course of action in dealing with civil protests. Even at present, the operational pattern includes the influx of police and Basij forces, which coincides with a blockade on social networks and cyberspace.

The regime's next step includes the use of violent means and making extensive arrests. However, evaluating the regime's attitude during mass demonstrations requires an analysis of the stage in which the Revolutionary Guards entered the campaign. During the current protests, this force was utilized only partially in periphery districts, indicating a low level of concern for the ruling elite.

6 <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c4n82838d72o>, Retrieved, 03.02.2023.

The regime's spokespersons are putting a lot of efforts into the cognitive realm. The narrative presented by the regime intended to classify the demonstrators as Western-oriented, aiming to overthrow the regime. This modus operandi's goal is to categorize the activists as collaborators with an external actor, which implies- "enemies of the Islamic republic". This argument intended to omit the legitimate basis of the mass protest by delegitimizing and faulting their motives.

Unsurprisingly, the regime extensively denies the protesters legitimacy whenever it is required to defend itself against domestic crises. This pattern intends to divert attention from the incompetence of the leadership to provide an appropriate response to the citizens' economic, health, and social distress.

The denial of the legitimacy of those who differ in their approach coincides with the government's standpoint. This model of governance (rule of the jurispudent) claims uniqueness and places Islam at the center of social order, claiming power from the descendants of the Prophet until the return of the Mahdi.

In summation, the current protest, which burst after Mahsa Amini's death, differ on several levels from past protests. At the time of the writing of this article, the social struggle is at a kind of status quo that regulates itself between the continuity of the struggle on the one hand and the use of violent means and arrests on the other hand. The ayatollahs regime is aware of its challenges because of the continued unrest. Therefore, it employs a variety of tangible and cognitive means to eradicate it. After all, the current regime was born and raised on a revolutionary concept that serves as an ideological compass nowadays. Therefore, it will do everything in its power to eradicate the discontent, regardless of the population's motives.