

REPORT

The Iranian Protests: Dimensions and Consequences

22, September 2022



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Hardline Policies and a Seething Society.....	5
Characteristics of the Protests	8
The Government’s Handling of the Protests	
– Between Denial and Denunciation.....	10
The International Position Toward the Iranian Protests ...	13
Significations and Consequences	14
Potential Scenarios of the Crisis	16

Introduction

Protests erupted across several Iranian cities on December 18, 2022, following the announcement of the killing of Iranian woman Mahsa Amini, 22. This came after morality police arrested Amini and took her to a detention facility, claiming she was wearing an inappropriate hijab while in Tehran with her family. The police announced that Amini had a stroke and posted video footage from inside the detention facility to support this narrative. However, it is clear that Amini was beaten inside the detention facility which resulted in her death. This was confirmed by photos of her inside the hospital where she died, as well as comments made by her relatives when the body was handed over. They stated again that the corpse bore evidence of the torture she endured prior to her death. The incident sparked a new wave of protests in a number of Iranian cities, stretching all the way to Tehran.

Indeed, these developments occurred against the backdrop of a tense domestic environment and deteriorating economic and social conditions. They also coincided with the waning popularity of Ebrahim Raisi's government which has failed to deliver on its promises to citizens one year after taking office in August 2021. These protests appear to be limited in comparison to the 2019 protests against fuel price increases and the 2017-2018 protests which swept through most Iranian cities and were of a popular nature. These protests, however, reflect the religious and social nature of Iran's protest movement. It also reflects growing popular rage and discontent, as well as a sense of deprivation and injustice. Nonetheless, the recent unrest highlights the growing chasm between the government and its self-proclaimed identity which it is attempting to impose on the people through repression and society. The Iranian people aspire to improve their standard living on social and cultural levels as well as to break free from the restraints imposed by the state, particularly when it comes to imposing a specific code of conduct and dress that people must follow in their private lives.

This report attempts to examine the dimensions of these protests and their consequences by providing a breakdown of the environment in which the protests erupted, specifically the religious and social



Hardline Policies and a Seething Society

The killing of Amini sparked protests in a number of Iranian cities extending all the way to Tehran. However, there were other factors that fueled this movement which can be highlighted as follows:

- **Hardline religious and cultural orientations by the Raisi government:** This crisis can be traced back to Raisi’s meeting with the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution’s secretariat-general. In June 2022, he directed the necessary coordination between cultural and executive entities and institutions to implement the 2005 decision of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution on hijab and chastity. This comes in the framework of resisting the systematic attack that aims to cause harm to society’s culture and revolutionary ideology by hostile outside powers. Taking a hard line on this issue is attributed to the strategies to promote the culture of chastity which the government adopted in 2004 during the term of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This decision constitutes the legal foundation for setting up the guidance patrol or the morality police, an entity whose role and activities have been expanding, especially toward women to the point where 7,000 undercover agents were deployed to uphold this moral plan, on top of which comes fully complying with the Islamic code of hijab.

In the meantime, Secretary of Iran's Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice Mohammad Saleh Hashemi Golpayegani, stated in June 2022 that chastity and hijab are symbols of conflict between Western and Islamic cultures. "If we demolish this wall, all the other walls of the political system will collapse," he said. The head of the Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice Kazem Seddiqi first called on the government to comply with the chastity and hijab regulations by changing the dress code of its own employees, and then going to the markets and trade unions to enforce it. The Ministry of Interior immediately issued a circular on the hijab and chastity for all institutions to follow, announcing the decision's implementation in government departments. Some government agencies began taking steps to segregate the sexes in the workplace and impose conditions for mixing, particularly when it came to women's dress codes. As a result, the morality police have gained religious and political cover to expand their operations. This law enforcement body has increased its presence on the streets and in shopping malls throughout Iranian cities. The morality police also began to crack down on women who broke the rules.

Since the beginning of 2022, protests have erupted against the government's treatment of women who refuse to wear the hijab. The protests progressed to the point where protesters either insulted Iran's supreme leader or publicly removed their hijab in squares and on highways — the most recent of these protests was to condemn the death of Amini at the hands of security forces. These protests were in response to the government's "hijab and chastity program," which the government is attempting to impose on society. The program imposes strict control over women and institutions, with no woman allowed to be present in public institutions if she does not wear a hijab or wears an inappropriate hijab. Iranian society has been confronted with a repressive policy aimed at imposing a specific culture and dress code on women. This sparked outrage on social media, not to mention the tendency to defy authorities on the street.

- Political failure one year after taking office: This cycle of discontent is linked to the crisis-ridden political environment as a result of the Raisi government's failure to deliver on promises made one year ago,

both at home and abroad. Criticism of his ministers' performance has increased, and the "reformists" have begun to criticize Raisi and his government for their management of internal crises, let alone their lack of expertise on foreign policy issues, particularly the stalled talks on reviving the nuclear agreement. The US pressures on Iran remain in place, with the United States also resuming sanctions escalation. The policy of resolving Iran's problems outside of the nuclear deal did not achieve the desired results, leading to a decline in the legitimacy of the Raisi government which took power following an election with the lowest voter turnout since the revolution.

- Deteriorating economic and living situation: The economic factor is important in explaining the popular outrage which is swiftly sparked by the latest crisis. Iran's economic and social crises have worsened recently. Moreover, there is the elimination of subsidies, unemployment, chronic inflation, and the government's fiscal deficit. This was evident over the last four months when the Raisi government eliminated the subsidized dollar allocated for basic food imports. This caused food prices in Iran to skyrocket to levels not seen in decades. Price increases approached 70 percent, including staple foods, which are a basic component of the food table of poor and low-income segments which account for a sizable portion of the Iranian population (more than two-thirds).

Iran's young generation of university graduates is confronted with the challenge of scarce job opportunities and high unemployment rates, not to mention soaring prices and the elimination of subsidies. Sanctions imposed by the United States have played a significant role in this matter. At least one out of every three educated young men in Iran is unemployed, and those who are employed do not earn enough because the national currency's value deteriorates by the day, eroding their purchasing power. As a result, many people are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. In light of the sanctions, the government can barely run the country's day-to-day operations, let alone pay the wages of millions of state employees. This creates a domestic environment rife with resentment toward the government, making it vulnerable to the outbreak of protests and increasing public disillusionment.

Characteristics of the Protests

The characteristics of the protest movement can be highlighted as follows:

- **Anger at the killing of Amini:** Protests erupted on the night of Friday, September 15, 2022, in the city of Saez in Iran's Kurdistan Province, in response to the death of Amini. The 22-year-old Kurdish woman died as a result of torture inflicted on her while detained at one of Iran's morality police facilities. She was not charged with moral or behavioral misconduct, but rather with failing to cover her head with a proper hijab. The incident infuriated and angered not only Iranian women, but the entire Iranian population over the government's handling of women's issues.
- **The unrest spreading from the peripheries to the capital Tehran:** Protests erupted in Baneh, then Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan Province, on Saturday, September 16, 2022. Protests then spread to Marivan, a city in the Kurdistan Governorate, as well as Urmia, Mahabad, Bukan, Sardasht, and Oshnavieh in West Azerbaijan Governorate, and Kermanshah and Javanrud in Kermanshah Governorate. The protests then spilled over into Tehran. As a result, the unrest extended from the peripheries to the heart Tehran, where it gained enormous momentum and significance in the Iranian government's main stronghold. This adds to the government's pressures as it faces a wide range of internal economic and social challenges, as well as international isolation and pressures.
- **Slogans and demands expressing anger at the government:** Video footage shows protesters chanting bold slogans against figures of the Iranian political system, particularly the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Commander of the Quds Force Qassem Soleimani (who was killed in a US drone strike near Baghdad Airport in early 2020) and the Basij. Students at Iranian universities chanted slogans protesting the killing of Amini. "Kill, kill, all those killed are brothers," "Get out Basiji," they chanted. In reference to Khamenei, some demonstrators in protesting cities and universities chanted, "Death to the dictator." They even tore apart and burned pictures of Khamenei and Soleimani, implying that the protesters are rejecting

the legitimacy and symbolism of the Iranian establishment itself. They expressed their outrage at its policies and the way it governs, which is based on imposing policies on the Iranian people through force and repression.

- Extensive participation by various social segments: Multiple social segments participated in the protests. They included university students at Amir Kabir University in Tehran, Tehran University of Art, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tarbiat Modares University, Isfahan University as well as other non-student elements who are all outraged at the government's policies. Political factions have also participated in the protests—including several male and female political activists at home. Female activists cut their hair to express their outrage and grief over Amini's death. Others removed and burned their headscarves. Protests broke out in front of Iranian embassies in some world capitals, including Germany and some Australian cities, in response to Amini's death.

- Active role by social media and movements on the ground: Iranians used a variety of methods to participate in the protests. Some took to the streets in cities and universities where there were protests, while others such as Amir Kabir University students, issued statements expressing their outrage and anger. Others used various social media platforms to protest Amini's death, exposing the government's policies aimed at restricting internet access in cities where protests had occurred and displaying photos of government forces using excessive force against protesters. According to Iranian newspapers, this use of force killed several protesters and injured dozens more in the head and heart, with many protesters detained. Iranians also shared videos of the morality police taking repressive measures against women who removed their headscarves.

- Support from opposition at home and overseas: By declaring mourning and a general strike, the protests received support from Iran's former Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi, as well as many Iranian Kurdish parties and civil and political activists. Many opposition political parties abroad, including the Farshkard Party, the Union Forum for a New Beginning, the Iranian Secular Democratic Party, the Constitutionalist Party of Iran-Liberal Democrats and the Iranian

Nationalist Party, have expressed support for the protests. Opposition members and influential figures overseas urged the international community to listen to the protesters' demands. Several campaigns to organize gatherings in Kermanshah and Kurdistan provinces also spread.

- **Government institutions hacked:** The Iranian government-run Smart Government Portal was hacked. Anonymous, a hacktivist group specializing in computer network security, issued a statement in which it claimed responsibility for the hacking. The group was also successful in hacking the website of Iran's Central Bank, rendering it dysfunctional.

The Government's Handling of the Protests – Between Denial and Denunciation

Raisi's government has used the carrot and stick policy, which is a hybrid of coercive punitive tools allied with decisions aimed at containing popular anger since the beginning of the protests. This is in addition to the usual media strategy of downplaying the size and scope of the protests and accusing outside actors of inciting them, which includes:

- **Denial and misleading the public:** The Iranian government has worked hard to improve its image in the eyes of the Iranian people. Iranian state-run television broadcast a short video clip from a surveillance camera showing that Amini's death was caused primarily by health issues rather than police intervention.

- **Repression on the ground:** The Iranian authorities have pursued the approach of suppressing the protests, as evidenced by forcibly dispersing protesters in several Iranian cities using violence and tear gas. By noon on Friday, August 21, 2022, six protesters had been killed in Kurdistan Governorate, with hundreds injured and dozens detained.

Below is a table indicating the number of civilians killed in Kurdistan Governorate.

	City	Number of dead and wounded		City	Number of dead and wounded
1	Divandarreh	killed, 33 2 wounded	1 0	Qerveh	wounded 17
2	Saqez	killed, 74 1 wounded	1 1	Kamyaran	wounded 11
3	Baneh	40 wounded	12	Takab	wounded 7
4	Mahabad	23 wounded	13	Maku	wounded 6
5	Sanandaj	66 wounded	1 4	Urmia	dead, 20 wounded 1
6	Marivan	wounded 9	15	Piranshahr	dead, 84 wounded 1
7	Dehgolan	dead, 16 1 wounded	16	Kermanshah	wounded 26
8	Bijar	wounded 9	17	Kermanshah	wounded 26
9	Naghadeh	15 wounded		Elam	wounded 13

Source: Hengaw Human Rights Agency, <https://bit.ly/3dtlPI2>.

- **Blocking internet access:** The government shut down internet services in Iranian cities where protests occurred in order to prevent the use of social media for organizing gatherings and posting videos from the protests. This is a systematic policy that the government has followed throughout all of the popular protests.

- **Attempting to contain anger:** The Iranian president has promised to investigate the incident. Iranian newspapers also reported the dismissal of the head of Tehran's morality police. These measures could be considered symbolic with the sole purpose of quelling the unending protests. In recent years, the Iranian government has become accustomed to taking such measures.

- **"Hardliner-reformist" divide:** A debate has erupted between Iran's two main political factions, the "reformists" and the "hardliners." Newspapers from both factions took two parallel approaches to dealing with the incident and its consequences on the ground. The first strategy involved paying close attention to the incident and the level of public interaction. This approach was pursued by what is known within the Iranian political establishment as the "reformist" movement. Among the responses issued by the movement was what was published by Arman Meli newspaper, Iran's most widely published newspaper affiliated with this movement. "It is the people's demand...missions of social security police should be reconsidered," said the article. According to the newspaper, the Iranian authorities are now paying the price for official security services' repressive policies. Other newspapers affiliated with the movement such as Mardom Salari and Jahan Sanat took the same approach.

In contrast to the "reformist" newspapers, publications affiliated with the "conservative" movement representing the "hardliner" view in Iran, most of which are close to the Revolutionary Guards and the supreme leader such as Vatan Emruz and Keyhan, have largely ignored the incident. Instead, these newspapers have focused on the "creators of rumors," accusing political and civil society activists of following in the footsteps of the government's enemies after condemning the killing of Amini, a stance echoed by the current Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. Additionally, newspapers urged authorities to take control of the virtual space

and social media platforms. By shining a light on some headlines from both movements' newspapers, one can see the concern about the tense atmosphere in Iran, as well as each movement's attempt to shirk responsibility and shift blame onto the other. During previous protests, Iranian political institutions pursued this strategy in order to contain popular anger and put an end to the protests. By taking this approach during the current unrest, Tehran hopes to contain the growing outrage over Amini's death and steer the protests to focus solely on the morality police.

The International Position Toward the Iranian Protests

- **European and American criticisms:** So far, the United States and key European countries such as France have expressed grave concern about police brutality and the resulting deaths. The death of the young Iranian woman was described as “unforgivable” by the White House. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Iran to “end its systematic persecution of women and allow peaceful protest,” adding that both the United States and the Iranian people mourn her death.
- **Hinting at providing Iranians with internet access:** Internet access has been severely hampered in various parts of the country. It is still Tehran's preferred method of silencing its people, limiting access to global media outlets and information about domestic protests. The last time such internet access was disrupted was during the May 2022 protests. There may be assistance from the outside world amid the new Iranian protests. This follows CEO SpaceX CEO Elon Musk tweeting about the possibility of providing free internet access to Iranians via the company's Starlink system, which has contributed to the free flow of information to and from Ukrainian border fronts and Russian-occupied regions. Despite the obstacles to such a measure, primarily US sanctions, the success of such a step is dependent on US approximations toward Iran thus far.
- **Criticisms by international rights organizations:** Amnesty International has called for a “criminal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the suspicious death” which could include torture and other forms of ill-treatment in detention.

Significations and Consequences

The ongoing protests have multiple significations and consequences, reflecting the interconnected factors that led to the outbreak of the protests and the reactions to them. This is evident at the level of the government and its heavy-handed response; the relationship between different segments of Iranian society and their relationship with the political system, let alone external pressures. The following are some of the most important significations and consequences:

- The government's concern about Iran's cultural and revolutionary identity: There are several intellectual and ideological significations: President Ebrahim Raisi took it upon himself to restore the country's post-revolutionary identity forcefully. This entailed strengthening "conservative" grassroots bases, appeasing fundamental "hardliner" clerics, and paving the way for Raisi to succeed Khamenei as one of the revolution's guardians of ideology and culture. The Iranian government has a long history of politicizing the hijab issue. This conflict between Iranian women and the government is not new. It is as old as the revolution. Women were first barred from entering government institutions without wearing a hijab, and then it was imposed on women at all times and in all circumstances, with no exceptions. This move was met with fierce opposition. But the government, which is dominated by political "hardliners" and religious traditionalists, insisted on imposing the hijab, ignoring opposing domestic and international voices. The Iranian ruling elite regards the issue of hijab as an integral part of Iran's revolutionary identity, and believes that any concession regarding its mandatory status will inevitably damage this identity and culture in favor of Western culture. This sentiment is frequently echoed by establishment figures, whether from the IRGC, security institutions, or the religious establishment. It could be said that it is a nagging concern for them because they are aware of the political system's fragility and its eroding incubators as a result of its numerous setbacks on economic, social, and religious levels. Therefore, the ruling elite has no choice but to resort to oppressive security measures.

- Moving forward and ignoring the core problems: The ruling religious elite appear to want to move forward by ignoring the genuine problems confronting the masses and instead focus on jurisprudential and ideological issues. These issues spark debate within Iran and the Shiite community, deflecting attention from the government's failure to meet the needs of the people, which is its primary task. Another point of view is the extralegal nature of official state apparatuses and the implementation of the hisbah system in the era of the modern state. It is an act similar to that of violent groups, such as intimidating people on the road and disregarding the rule of law.

- Defying the government and increasing popular anger: Some women's removal of the hijab at Amini's funeral gave the impression that citizens were defying the government. The rapid spread of protests reflects the level of discontent within Iranian society, which is not limited to economic issues but has expanded to include issues of individual freedoms. Amini's Kurdish ethnicity was one of the factors that quickly fueled the protests, particularly in the Kurdish regions. On the other hand, it reflects the common causes that unite Iranians from various backgrounds against the ruling elite. This will make it more difficult for the government to contain future protests when they take on a nationalist tone and are no longer limited to a single region or faction. These protests, along with previous protests, will contribute to the widening gap between the religious establishment and Iranian society in general. Amini's young age, 22, highlights the schism between the younger generation and the ruling elite, revealing its eroding religious legitimacy.

- The "reformists" attempts to restore their legitimacy in the domestic arena: Following the death of Amini, the "reformists" harshly criticized the government. Following their recent marginalization, the "reformists" are attempting to reclaim their standing. The movement seeks to demonstrate that it supports and defends the Iranian people's rights, with the killing of Amini serving as a springboard for a new political project in Iran. The reactions of former President Mohammad Khatami, former Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri, former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Hassan Khomeini, former Communications Minister in the Rouhani government Azeri

Jahromi, and former Iranian government Spokesman Ali Rabiei demonstrate this. “Reformist” female icons such as Azar al-Mansouri and Masoumeh Ebtekar have made statements that support this position. The “hardliners” are harshly criticizing the “reformists” for their stance. They are urging Iranians to take a firm stance against the “reformists,” describing them as arrogant and suggesting that they be questioned and held accountable for their position on Amini’s death. There is no doubt that the deep schisms between the two movements are clearly manifested with regard to cultural and human rights issues, the impact of which will be felt in the upcoming elections.

- Lending a lever to the West at the negotiating table: The Iranian opposition overseas quickly responded to these events which captured global attention. However, the reactions of international organizations and Western governments were not at the same level, which gives an impression to the opposition that the calculus of world powers remains largely dependent on their interests and that they are not serious about promoting democracy and human rights in Iran. This policy will remain confined to being a lever used against the government. In light of the ongoing negotiations to revive the nuclear deal and in light of the orientations of the Biden administration that prioritizes diplomacy, it is unlikely that the position of the United States and the Europeans will go beyond leveling criticism at the government. It will just be used as a lever. Perhaps the dire economic situation in Iran, especially if the protests spread, will force Iran to make concessions in the upcoming negotiations with the West to resurrect the nuclear deal. By doing so, the government will attempt to increase its financial resources, alleviate the harsh living conditions, appease the street, bridge the gap between Iranians and the “conservative” government that controls power and all state apparatuses, and preserve its eroding legitimacy.

Potential Scenarios of the Crisis

In light of the circumstances surrounding the Iranian government, the ongoing wave of protests could result in one of the following scenarios:

▪ Continued crisis and expanding protests: This scenario is supported by growing popular discontent on the ground as a result of the economic crisis resulting in deteriorating living conditions, high levels of inflation and widespread unemployment. This is exacerbated by the government's failure to address a number of crises including the water crisis. This is in addition to the economic consequences of Russia's war on Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Iran. This will increase public dissatisfaction and limit the prospects for resolving the differences with the West over the nuclear deal, and the US resumption of sanctions against Iran. Anger and discontent are caused by a variety of factors. The schism between the government and the Iranian people continues to deepen as the government is determined to impose cultural and religious rules while ignoring the plight of Iranians who are struggling to make ends meet. Even if the momentum of these protests wanes in the coming period, the realities underpinning Iran's various crises make it likely that social mobilization will resume if an incident similar to Amini's death or an unpopular government decision is reached in the future. This comes as factional protests have been continuing for years. They reflect growing outrage among various social segments and classes, particularly as protests have increased at universities and among young men, who are typically viewed as catalysts for change and believe it is necessary.

▪ The protests dying down: This could be the more likely scenario. The protests, like previous protests, are expected to die down in the short term. This scenario is supported by the government's pursuit of a hybrid policy of containment and repression to overcome the crisis. Concerning containment, the government has condemned the incident, and the police have expressed regret. Ebrahim Raisi himself has intervened, promising Amini's family that an investigation will be launched into the incident. The Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice also weighed in on the hijab issue, stating that addressing it requires the repeal of the provision which states that not wearing the hijab is a crime punishable by detention and trial. In terms of repression, the government has extensive experience in suppressing protests, including the use of force against protesters

and shutting down the internet which has an impact on the protests' momentum. Furthermore, there is no international support for the Iranian people's demands and human rights in Iran. As a result, the opposition parties will be in an unfavorable position.



✉ info@rasanahiiis.com

🐦 📺 📺 @rasanahiiis

🌐 www.rasanah-iiis.org

