‘Women, Life, Freedom’: The Politicization of the Hijab in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Following mass protests of Mahsa Amini’s killing by the Iranian Morality Police, global news coverage shifted to Iran. This paper looks at the current mass movement from a socio-historical perspective, specifically focusing on the role of veiling. It distinguishes between the politicization and the institutionalization of the veil, arguing that veiling in Iran is inherently political and has been used as a form of protest. Recently, however, the Iranian state has transformed it into a tool for social control of women, thus institutionalizing it. The paper traces the evolving role of veiling. It begins prior to the Iranian Revolution, when veiling was banned and perceived as a tool of empowerment, then moves on to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, where it became mandatory, and laws oppressing women’s freedoms became increasingly apparent. During the 2009 Green Movement, the image of women in society was profoundly altered and showed an attempted reconciliation between Islam and democracy. The current movement in Iran is a result of decades of policing women’s wear and violent repression by the government, and its goal is to transform the scope of religious influence by limiting it to the private sphere.

Introduction

"I will not let this story end in silence. I will spread this news throughout Iran and will pursue my complaint." These are the words Mahsa Jina Amini's brother, Zhina Amini, pronounced to the National Council of Resistance of Iran Women's Committee on September 16, 2022 (NCRI Women Committee 2022). Mahsa Jina Amini died on September 16, 2022, after being arrested by the Morality Policy for wearing 'inappropriate attire' in public. Her hijab did not cover her hair adequately, according to the Morality Police, and she did not represent a 'proper' Muslim woman. Her family insists she was beaten to death, but the police claims she suffered from a heart attack. Her tragic death caused an uproar amongst the Iranian population, translating into a mass protest: men and women took to the streets, burned their hijabs, cut their hair, and challenged the fundamental politico-religious values on which the Islamic Republic of Iran is based. The Iranian regime violently oppressed the protests, and over sixteen thousand protestors have since been arrested. The mandatory veiling of Muslim women has been used as a form of both political and social control since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but the politicization of the veil commenced even before.

This paper will argue that rendering the veil legally mandatory after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 increased the gendering of Iranian women's identity by limiting it to a stereotypical role and focusing on veiled women as the symbol of the ideal Islamic society. In the context of this paper, gendering refers to the process of socialization of women's identity by having their gender transcend everything they are, how they live and how they are perceived. Further, the Green Movement of 2009 served as a sign of discontentment from the Iranian population by confronting the imposed sociopolitical structures of increased control of women and harsh limits on freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The current movement in Iran is the result of decades of policing and institutionalizing women's wear, and aims to transform the scope of religious influence by limiting it to the private sphere. Veiling remains an individual and personal choice, and while politicizing it was, and is, an integral part of the women's movement in Iran, institutionalizing it has removed the individual value of the act, utilizing it as a means of social control.

In order to examine the effects of the Islamic Revolution and the Green Movement on the politicization of the hijab, I will first offer historical context through an examination of the politico-religious system in Iran. Next, I will evaluate the role of the Islamic Revolution as a trigger for using mandatory veiling as an instrument of oppression. The Green Movement of 2009 originated as a response to the increased oppression, demanding regime changes and challenging basic perceptions of women's role in society. Lastly, I will draw parallels between the current feminist movement in Iran and the role of veiling in Iranian state identity. This demonstrates that veiling remains an inalienable individual choice, but its instrumentalization has balanced between being used as a tool of empowerment and a tool of oppression, and the role of the veil itself is widely discussed between Muslim scholars.

Contextualization

To understand how the arrest of an individual veiled woman became amplified into a mass civil movement, we must examine why women in Iran began protesting against the veil, challenging the foundations of the Iranian theological regime. Iran today is an Islamic theocracy headed by a Supreme Leader, combined with a parliamentary system consisting of an elected President and parliament. Theologically, it follows the theory of Velayat-e Faqih, also referred to as the unelected Rule of the Jurists, a theory establishing the rule of a country by Islamic Jurists as well as a Guardian Council. Jurists are not elected — rather, the Council consists of six appointed jurists and six nominated by the parliament, and are placed above the elected parliament in the hierarchy of power. These jurists decide whether the laws passed by parliament conform to a strict interpretation of Shari'a, the Islamic religious law (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 216). Meanwhile, the words of the Supreme Leader of Iran are considered equally legitimate with the Qur'an within the Velayat-e Faqih system. He can thus issue and repeal legislation if he perceives that it may conflict with state interests and religious obligations (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 7). Therefore, the Supreme Leader holds supreme power in the Iranian state, superseding all other forms of authority. The current supreme leader is Ayatollah Khamenei, who has been in power since 1989.

The Shi'a branch of Islam draws its political legitimacy from governments embracing certain values and norms derived from religious texts (Sayyed al-Sayyad & Alwadi 2021, 7). Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2017) distinguishes between rights — haqq — and honour — namus — in Islam. Namus is understood to be a core value within Iranian society and is rarely questioned, and it is tightly linked to the sexual integrity of girls. Since their namus is in their bodies, it is perceived to be a boy's duty to protect the namus of their female relatives. A way of preserving this namus would thus be through mandatory veiling and covering from the male gaze when in public, or limited rights to divorce and child custody (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 219). This view on women was especially enforced post-revolution, from 1979 onward.

The Islamic Revolution of 1978-79

The Islamic Revolution of 1978 to 1979 plays a crucial role in understanding how and when the politicization of the hijab in modern-day Iran originated. It triggered decades of increasing oppression of women through Shari'a law and by rendering veiling mandatory for women in public. The institutional politicization of veiling was based on the claims of protecting the namus, and had the effect of increasingly gendering Iranian women's identity, which resulted in the first feminist movement against the regime.

From 1978 to 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the spiritual leader of the social movement that overthrew Western-aligned Shah Pahlavi. In the years prior to the revolution, nationalism emerged in the region; in Iran, this nationalism was expressed through the promotion of Islamic values and the 'ideal' Muslim. For women, emerging values included veiling and dressing modestly (Al-Sayed al-

Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 5-6). Four anti-Shah protestors set Cinema Rex in Abadan on fire as a protest against the monarchy, killing over 350 people, triggering widespread protests against the Shah and marking the beginning of The Islamic Revolution (Abbas 2017, 716). After the 1953 coup d'Etat, the Shah had become closely tied with the United States and the Western Bloc and largely imposed the Western will through an increasingly authoritarian ruling. The 1963 White Revolution, a vast series of reforms which sought to redistribute wealth and boost economic growth, led to Ayatollah Khomeini's arrest due to his widespread support and encouragement of the protest. He fled and took exile first in Najaf, Iraq, and later in Iran. He gradually increased his opposition to the Shah for over fourteen years by promoting his version of Shi'a Islam and the Islamic-democratic narrative in the media (Tabaar 2018, 61-86). In October 1977, tensions escalated between Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shah following their contradictory views of the role of Islam and the political future of Iran, leading protests to become a campaign of civil resistance and paralyzing the country. By January 1979, the Shah had left Iran, and the government invited Ayatollah Khomeini back to Iran, whereupon he turned the former monarchy into an Islamic Republic based on his principles (Abrahamian 2009, 163).

The first politicization of the hijab had already begun in 1936 when Shah Reza Pahlavi banned women from veiling in public — they risked getting it pulled off their heads if they did (New York Times 2022). However, the laws concerning the hijab became stricter after the Islamic Revolution (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 5). During the Shah's rule and in the years leading up to the revolution, women increasingly wore some kind of veil, notably chadors, as a symbol of resistance to the Westernization policies and the discourse it pushed on women, as well as in protest to the 1936 prohibition: "wearing the veil represented a particular moral stance – morality defined positively by Islamic law or negatively by opposition to the immorality of the Shah's regime and the West in general" (Betteridge 2021, 110). Hence, for Iranian women, veiling was not only a religious matter but also a deliberate political statement, which women used to represent themselves (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 9). Thus, there is an important distinction between women politicizing veiling through their free will and using it as a political statement, and the institutional politicization that occurred later. Although the monarchy decreasingly enforced the law prohibiting veiling before the Revolution, it can be argued that, to a certain extent, there was a social pressure to wear it due to its political importance in rejecting Western values.

Before Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, he had deliberately kept his statements regarding women's issues vague — it allowed for more women to follow his words since he ensured that the largest number possible of women could self-identity with his sayings. Nevertheless, for many religious leaders, modest clothes were integral to the definition of Muslim women. It was only when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power that he took a firm stance on gender roles and the place of wom-

en in society through numerous policies and statements in public speeches. When wearing a veil in public spaces first became mandatory on March 7, 1979, thousands of women protested against it in the street on the following day, International Women's Day. Women protesting for their free choice of veiling was the first protest against the Islamic government, occurring only a handful of days after they came to power. Consequently, the clerics temporarily reversed the obligation, showing that governments can choose to hear and cede to the demands of feminist movements, but it is a conscious choice whether they choose to do so or not. However, the Iranian regime slowly started to reintroduce the obligation in various public spaces — for instance, in administrative buildings, then on public squares, and later in universities. Eventually, wearing it became mandatory for all girls and women over the age of nine in all public areas (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 5).

Mandatory veiling was not the only restriction on women's rights and freedoms following the revolution. A long series of restrictive laws were gradually put in place — women were banned from working as judges, the age for legal marriage was lowered to thirteen years old, and they were forbidden access to numerous higher education fields (Fazaeli 2016, 76). Mandatory veiling led to university environments being perceived as safer, thus increasing women's access to higher education and parallelly resulting in incredible backlash for the regime as a result of increased education levels. When attending universities and achieving higher levels of education, Iranian women also gradually became more aware of societal issues as well as the irrationality of mandatory veiling, thus participating in the growing discontent of the regime and the institutionalization of their personal decisions (New York Times 2022). The 1979 revolution resulted in a new, gendered identity for Iranians, and the continuously stricter laws on religious grounds resulted in rising discontent with the regime.

The 2009 Green Movement

Increasing gender awareness and claims for secularization resulted in the Green Movement, the biggest civil movement in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. Gender was placed at the center of the debate and demands for reforming the regime, showing alternative sides to womanhood and challenging basic assumptions on which the culture of veiling is based.

In the 1980s and 1990s, gender debates and the 'woman question' increasingly dominated the international discourse, and new religious thinking of Islam emerged as a result. It offered new interpretations of Islam and its reconciliation with modernity by separating religion from the state as well as rethinking women's place within society. This discourse was highly appealing to the women and youth becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the current state's policies (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 221). Although there were some protests against the religious regime and for women's rights during the 1990s, the 2000s emerged with an increasing restriction of rights, notably in the form of stringent censorship laws on freedom of speech and freedom of the press (Tabaar 2018, 228). As a consequence, tensions escalated between con-

servatives and reformists. The conservatives sought to maintain the current regime, while the reformists harshly criticized the Velayat-e Faqih system (Tabaar 2018, 230). In the early 2000s, reformists took control of local councils and Majles, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, claiming "the end of patriarchy" and increasingly orienting the discourse towards women's place in society and veiling (Tabaar 2018, 230). By promoting free media and presenting an alternative view on current political events, they engaged the youth by increasing their political awareness and exposing the corruption of the regime in place (Tabaar 2018, 229).

In parallel, Supreme Leader Khamenei wished to create a balance between the conservative right and the 'principlist' ultraconservative right by removing the reformists and continuing to promote Iran's rising status in the region. The national presidential elections would be the key to implementing this (Tabaar 2018, 237). Nevertheless, popular discontent continued to grow among the people by virtue of the reformists' power in the Majles, exposing corruption in the media, and the opposition between reformists and conservatives grew stronger. Theocracy was perceived to be incompatible with democracy due to its institutionalization and politicization of religion, and the Iranian population wanted change — a fact that became apparent throughout the 2009 elections.

The June 2009 elections opposed conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with reformists Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, two former politicians and leaders of the Green Movement. On election day, the fear of election rigging was prominent, and conservative media reported Ahmadinejad as the winner while it was still possible to cast a vote. The media announced that he had won, obtaining approximately two-thirds of the total votes, which only participated in the increasing suspicions (Tabaar 2018, 240). In response, millions of peaceful protesters took to the streets with the slogan 'Where is my vote?', demanding the ballots be recounted and Ahmadinejad be removed from the presidency. The demonstration on June 15, 2009 was Iran's largest since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, illustrating the extent to which public discontent with the regime was prominent (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 227).

Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2017) analyzed the Green Movement and the 2009 elections and found four key moments that profoundly affected Iran's power structures and the image of women presented to the Iranian population. First, the elections affected the nature of women's political participation. Before the 2009 elections, Mohammad Khatami, president from 1997 to 2005, assembled both secular and religious women through promises of improving women's condition within society, and the same solidarity was translated into the Green Movement. Secondly, Zahra Rahnavard appeared on the side of reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi as an equal partner and intellectual to her husband. It was the first time a woman was seen in higher levels of politics in Iran, and she openly supported women's and human rights (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 229). She participated in visualizing women outside of a traditional role and as an equal to her husband, being a symbol of empowerment and a role model for many

Iranian women. Thirdly, around the same time, letters from the wives of imprisoned reformist head figures were published online — they described in great detail how the wives longed for their husbands to return home, demanding equal rights and free speech. Like with Zahra Rahnavard, they showed a different image of womanhood, which was not common in Iran, demonstrating emotional dimension and deferring from the image of a pure, chaste wife, thus breaking stereotypes and narratives pushed by the government, notably that of namus. Lastly, there were horrific revelations of rape and sexual abuse of both men and women detained in Iranian prisons. The abusive detention practices profoundly disrupted the governmental discourse built around the culture of veiling, justified as a way of protecting women and keeping society safe as a whole (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 230).

More generally, these four events confronted Iranian sociopolitical structures because they challenged women's roles and positions within society by empowering key figures or showing alternatives to traditional roles. They also challenged the assumptions on which the culture of veiling is based by proving women's sole role is not to serve men and stay quiet and chaste, protecting their namus by giving up their haqq. The Green Movement originated as a confrontation to the instrumental use of Shari'a to justify authoritarian rule and violations of human rights and democratic principles (Mir-Hosseini 2017, 233). Furthermore, it proved to the Iranian government that public discontent existed, was visible, and they could not act with impunity without backlash. The legitimacy and the credibility of the Islamic Republic were shaken to its core — fundamental principles such as the vision of the role of women in society and the government's religious authority were challenged.

The Current Feminist Movement in Iran

Currently, one of the main focuses of Iranian elites is to preserve Islamic culture as a result of the 1979 revolution, with a particular importance given to the veiling of women as the symbol of Muslim society. This represents an intricate overlap of social norms and religious issues, where wearing a veil has shifted from a religious ritual to a political right.

The veiling of women is a fundamental issue in state identity and is equally employed as a way to promote political and religious legitimacy. Multiple clerics warning against the decline of Islam as a result of women refusing to wear the hijab accentuates the gravity of the issue (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 13-16). As a result, mandatory veiling is depicted as essential in order to preserve Islam.

On the other hand, scholars such as Mohammed al-Sayed al-Sayyad argue that it is hypocritical to justify the necessity of intervention from the state regarding veiling since the Qur'an is ambiguous on the subject. Ayatollah Kamal Hayadri perceives the hijab's validity as depending on how much (not) wearing it draws attention to the person wearing it, and Ayatollah Hossein Montazeri argues there is no style for the hijab, thus indirectly criticizing the extent to which the Iranian government is policing the Iranian population (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 14). The academics all agree on

the need for women to veil, although it should be a private matter and thus not up for the government to decide nor impose on its population. They are not against women veiling but against the institutional politicization of the matter.

Tehran violently oppressing a social movement challenging the regime and anyone who criticizes it is not a new nor unseen phenomenon. Between 2003 and 2013, over 30 thousand people were imprisoned for speaking out against the Iranian regime. This represents grave human rights violations, including violations of freedoms of speech, conscience and peaceful assembly (Al-Sayed al-Sayyad & al-Bawi 2020, 9). The Iranian regime has a history of arbitrarily arresting opponents of the government and shutting down critiques harshly and quickly.

Furthermore, it is important to underline that the current social movement in Iran is not aiming to disregard the use of the veil completely. On the contrary, each woman has an individual relationship with the veil and reasons for wearing it, let it be imposed or voluntarily, and the government's involvement in said relationship has not been tolerated well. Rather, the movement's goal is to transform the religious order in place to inhibit it from imposing its rules in both the private and the public sphere and transform the regime's perception of free speech. Although some scholars analyzing the current social movement perceive the hijab as solely being an oppressive item that cannot lead to women's emancipation, this essay argues that in no case should veiling be institutionally politicized. The hijab has the importance the individual wearer gives to it — this was seen prior to the Islamic Revolution, when wearing it was a form of individual empowerment and resistance to a Westernised society, and today, taking it off is an act of resistance to the religious authority in place. French activist Camille Etienne reflects on the forms of civil rebellion by disobeying laws in place in order to promote revolution: "you must understand that as citizens, when there are laws that are unjust, then we must disobey them" (FranceTV 2022). By making a distinction between what is legal and what is legitimate, she underlines the importance of civil disobedience in pushing for political reforms and societal progress, which is exactly the method employed by Iranian women in the fight for their rights.

The scope of the people involved in the current social movement in Iran is a key distinction from past movements. Although the slogan is "Women, Life, Freedom", it is not solely women who are involved. Men joining a women's liberation movement underlines the deep-rooted critiques of the movement for the regime in place and underlines the discontent with the political and religious order (Laacher 2022). Furthermore, a student-protester from Tehran explains in an interview with French Le Monde that in previous movements, primarily younger people protested. Nonetheless, protestors now originate from all social classes and ages, ranging from parents with their children to students to older people (Golshiri & Zerrouky 2022). The number of people protesting leads the current movement to be considered civil unrest and maybe the beginning of a revolution.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Islamic Revolution and the Green Movement were caused by and, in return, perpetuated the politicization of the veil for women in Iran. Although the ban on veiling in 1936 marked the beginning of the politicization of the veil, it acted as a symbol of resistance against Western influence until it became mandatory in public spaces as a result of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It based its religious and political legitimacy upon a projection of the 'ideal' woman, limiting their role and place in society. Wearing the veil was no longer a sign of resistance or empowerment, but a sign of oppression. The Green Movement initially emerged in 2009 as a response to election rigging, but it quickly transformed into the biggest civil movement since the Revolution, confronting sociopolitical structures and norms that had been put in place. The current movement in Iran is a result of decades of policing women's wear and violent repression by the government, and the goal is to transform the scope of religious influence by limiting it to the private sphere. Women taking off their veils and burning them on the street come after years of repression and limited individuality — they are tired of being used as a political instrument for the Iranian regime. As demonstrated throughout the paper, mandatory or prohibition of veiling has been used with various political goals in mind, completely undermining the original purpose and individual connection of wearing it, which is connecting and strengthening their relationship with their God by following His wishes. The current movement in Iran underlines a crucial duality between the public and the private sphere as well as feminism and Islam, all tied together in a gendered political process undermining Iranian women's basic human rights of individual freedom of choice.

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