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Women, Life, Freedom

After the murder of Mahsa Amini, a feminist revolution is putting pressure on the Iranian regime. It is high time for Europe to take a stance

Jin, Jiyan, Azadi (Women, Life, Freedom), the main slogan of the Kurdish feminist movement, is now echoing through the streets of Iranian cities small and large for the first time. These are the biggest protests seen in Iran since the Green Movement in 2009. Governments in the EU and the West can look away no longer.

The demonstrations were triggered by the murder of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini at the hands of Iran's institutional hijab police. The 22-year-old was detained on 13 September on charges of not wearing a hijab (headscarf) in accordance with the Islamic Republic's regulations. A few hours later, she was admitted to hospital for head injuries, sustained by the hijab police, where she lay in a coma for several days, succumbing to her injuries on 16 September.

At Zhina's funeral, attended by a large proportion of the Kurdish population of Saqqez, Zhina's hometown, many women took off their headscarves as a sign of protest against Iran's compulsory hijab policy, waving them in the air, shouting *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi.* The fury over the government's act of femicide has driven people across the country to the streets. The protests began out of solidarity with Zhina's family, but soon became a resistance movement against the mandatory wearing of the hijab, against gender apartheid in Iran and ultimately against the Islamic Republic itself.

A system of gender apartheid

What we have seen in recent days on the streets of Iran is a continuation of the spontaneous protests that erupted in 2017, which are increasingly taking place at the same time as protests organised by trade unions, pensioners and teachers. And yet, despite this connection, these latest protests are clearly feminist in nature – with protesters calling for the obligatory hijab to be abolished. There is a notable abundance of women

on the streets, as we see images of hijab-free women on the streets every day, eating, protesting, dancing and burning their headscarves. It is a radical form of feminist civil disobedience. Despite the Islamic Republic's dictate, the women protesting are calling for an end to the compulsory hijab, attempting to forge a new reality; this is nothing less than a feminist revolution.

The garment represents an unresolved struggle between the regime and Iranian women.

It's no coincidence that the people taking to the streets now are also calling for the Islamic Republic to be overthrown. The compulsory hijab has become a symbol of the omnipresence and tyranny of the Iranian government since it seized power after the 1979 revolution. The garment represents an unresolved struggle between the regime and Iranian women, as well as sexual and gender minorities. The regime's existence and survival depend heavily on compelling women to wear the hijab, controlling their bodies and enforcing a system of gender apartheid. One cannot exist without the other.

That is why the people protesting on the streets of Iran also face tremendous violence from the Islamic Republic's security forces, shooting people, beating them with batons, deploying tear gas and arresting people en masse. The way these protests are being suppressed is particularly violent, especially in the peripheral regions and already marginalised areas of the country. According to Iran Human Rights, 76 people were killed in the protests, including four children, by 26 September.

Complaisant through silence

But can Europe do about the enormous repression of these historic demonstrations in Iran? It is high time for European governments to take a stance. So far, they have put economic cooperation with Iran ahead of the issue of human rights violations in the Islamic Republic. Now is the time for Europe to put human rights at the top of the agenda in its relationship with Iran.

As protesters are being killed on the streets, Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi, one of the perpetrators of the murder of thousands of political opponents at the start of the revolution, recently travelled, without a single care, to New York to deliver a speech to the United Nations. This is more than aggravating and lends a legitimate face to the reprisals of the Islamic Republic, as a feminist activist from Iran emphasised.

She went on to say that, for many years, the Islamic Republic has blamed every protest in Iran on the West and labelled demonstrators as Western spies. Iran even took people with dual citizenship hostage and detain them for years. So far, Europe has done little to stop this systematic hostage-taking and, through its silence, has been complicit in it, as well as the effects it has on the prisoners.

Failing to react is in itself evidence of a racist attitude that regards human rights as rights that only belong to the people of Europe.

Europe should now at long last respond unequivocally to the disruptions of the internet and access to information in Iran. While we in the West couldn't imagine not having access to the internet for days, Iran has always prevented people from accessing information easily through filters. The country moves to restrict or completely block internet access when protests and strikes erupt. During the November 2019 protests, the regime carried out a huge massacre as the internet was down, and we still don't know how many people died at that time. The internet has been disrupted several times in recent days.

Europe needs to speak out against Iran's approach and force decision-makers to respond with targeted sanctions and diplomatic pressure against those responsible. Otherwise, Europe will be complicit in the Islamic Republic's repression of the Iranian people.

Failing to react is in itself evidence of a racist attitude that regards human rights as rights that only belong to the people of Europe. The time has come to understand the importance of taking a stance. We need to look beyond the European horizon and develop a genuine interest in what is happening outside of Europe. Europe should listen to the voices of the people and their struggles, which are now, more than ever, echoed in Iran.



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