

IRAN: the freedom revolt by women and youth shakes the foundations of the theocracy

The death on 16 September of Mahsa (also known as Jina) Amini, aged 22, an inhabitant of Kurdistan who moved to Tehran, following torture during her detention by the forces of repression, kicked off a new and important wave of protests in Iran. The young woman had been arrested and then killed because she had not worn her Islamic headscarf, *hijab*, correctly.

The present revolts rise up against patriarchal power justified in the name of Islam. The streets of big cities fill with women who throw down the headscarf, burn it, and stop submitting to the pitiless violence of the state. They also cut their hair, in a powerful symbolic gesture. Hair being for Islam (and all known religions) an expression of women's supposed sexual power and immodesty. It's a gesture absolutely forbidden for those confined to their reproductive role and subjected to male domination.

The women lead the men in the struggle against patriarchy and theocracy

Previous reactions to the headscarf question could be seen in December 2017 in Tehran, during the riots against the high cost of living and unemployment. A 31-year-old woman, Vida Movahed, climbed up on an electric transformer and waved her headscarf on the end of a stick. Dozens of women followed her desperate rebellious example, in 2017 and 2018, and paid the price by being arrested.

Contrary to these individual acts of insubordination, the women who tear up this oppressive rag today are no longer isolated. Passers-by take the cops to task when they try to arrest them. Every night, in dozens of cities of all sizes, protesters attack the offices of the forces of repression and burn symbols of power. These protests confront the repressive forces, who reply with real bullets, ceaseless clubbing, arrests and torture. The protesters' courage and tenacity are exemplary.

Women, of all ages, are clearly in the forefront of the fighting and in large numbers. Educated and waged proletarian women, in subordinate jobs, are also involved in the movement. They experience a discrepancy between the condition reserved for women by the mullahs and

their real participation in society, because they escape their domestic prison to some extent.

They are surrounded by many young men, sons and grandsons of women who have been under the yoke of the Islamic Republic for 40 years, who do not hesitate to attack the police. The offensive led by this movement has already cleared the streets of the major cities of the patrols that enforce the correct wearing of headscarves.

The universities have become nerve centres of the movement. Despite the repression by the *basij* (the regime's militia), students at the elite Sharif university gained the solidarity of the lecturers, who went on strike for the freeing of all arrested students¹. In several other universities, students launched protests against the repression of their Sharif comrades.

Secondary school students, even pupils, also took part. Numerous videos show them unveiled, shouting slogans against the Supreme Leader, telling off and chasing away the representatives of the administration or the *pasdaran* (the Revolutionary Guards, the army and political backbone of the regime). There again, with an undeniable courage, because the paid scum of the authorities don't hesitate to torture, rape and even kill young women.

The pasdaran try to spark a civil war to stifle the movement

The funeral of Jina Amini, in Saqez in Kurdistan, provoked the first demonstration involving collective headscarf removal. Like other ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups in Iran, the Kurds are subjected to a specific oppression by the central authorities. The Kurds in Iran are the preferred target of the Islamic Republic which never ceases to punish them for their repeated uprisings since 1979. Following mass protests in Iranian Kurdistan, the regime very rapidly deployed combat troops of the army and the *pasdaran* in the region, putting in place *de facto* martial law. Since 23 September the Iranian mili-

¹ See: *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/06/world/middleeast/iran-protests-sharif-university-masha-amini.html>

tary have bombarded villages in Iraq seen as sheltering Kurdish militants. In the towns and villages, the *Pasdaran* fire real bullets, indiscriminately, at the population, as in Sanandaj, the capital of Iranian Kurdistan².

On the other side of the Iranian territory, in Baluchistan, one of the poorest regions, where Sunnis are the majority, a similar situation is taking shape. After the rape of a 15-year-old girl by a police superintendent in the town of Chabahar, on 30 September, a demonstration was organised in Zahedan in front of a police station. It was machine-gunned by the forces of repression. Provisional count: a hundred dead. The slaughter did not go completely unpunished because an armed group shot down five members of the forces of order, including a regional commander of the *pasdaran* intelligence service³.

This military escalation by the Tehran regime in the areas inhabited by these national minorities might seem disproportionate in the face of demos similar to those happening in the rest of the country. Not at all. In the peripheral regions the state applies a “strategy of tension” so as to provoke violent reactions from national minorities which it can use to arouse a xenophobic reflex in the Persians. In this way, the government hopes to revive a demand for a return to order. By creating “enemies within” the state tries to draw the ranks of civil society behind it and to discourage the undecided from taking part in the present movement.

The obligation to cover up is an integral part of the patriarchal rule over civil society

The woman question is central for the Islamic Republic, and has been since it took power. After a first abortive attempt after 6 days of protests, straight after the revolution, on 8 March 1979, the wearing of headscarves became obligatory in 1983 when the Islamic counter-revolution had finished purging its political opponents and consolidating its power.

The revolution of 1979 was born from a movement of national liberation from the Western powers, by kicking out the Shah. The mullahs’ counter-revolution was made against women and their movement of liberation inspired by the global sexual revolution of the

1960s and ‘70s. At the time, it was a question for the mullahs and the *bazaris* – the petty bourgeois traditional traders – of protecting a reactionary mode of cohesion and class reproduction, based on the subjugation of women and mediated by arranged marriages. In exchange for support from males of the dominated classes in this traditional functioning, all women were relegated to the family sphere, under the authority of the little foremen of patriarchy, the same heads of family. Still today, the Iranian ruling classes, whether it’s the mullahs, the officers of the repressive apparatus or the political and business clans at the centre of state power, form a body partly through these matrimonial alliances.

At that time Ruhollah Khomeini shouted that “*each time that, in a bus, a female body brushes past a male body, it is a blow that weakens the edifice of our revolution*”, but it was still the same in 2016, when a decree adopted by the Supreme Leader forbade women from riding bicycles, to keep them chaste, indicating to the *basiji* that this diktat was to be respected.

Hijab is today the visible expression of patriarchal power. Giving in on this point is unimaginable for the state, since it means going back on one of the last still active founding acts of the regime. On the side of the subordinate classes, on the contrary, the compromise of 1979 is now obsolete. Economic conditions render marriage, in its traditional form, inaccessible for a growing part of the population.

The situation of women is untenable. While 71% of them access higher education (a percentage comparable to that for men – 76%), the labour market, accessible to them in theory, remains blocked in practice⁴: only 14% of women over 15 have a job, according to the World Bank⁵. Despite a rate of education comparable to that of men, the choice before the overwhelming majority of women of the subordinate classes is to be imprisoned in the parental home, or in marriage, or prostitution.

² See: PBS Newshour, “2 people fatally shot...”: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/2-people-fatally-shot-as-protests-against-irans-government-enter-4th-week>

³ See: New York Times, “It was a massacre...”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/14/world/middleeast/iran-zahedan-crackdown.html>

⁴ See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/14/headscarves-are-not-the-only-thing-women-are-protesting-in-iran/>

⁵ Compared, for example, with 52% in France and Czechia, 55% in the US or 62% in China.

The fight of Iranian women points towards an internationalisation of the struggle against patriarchy

While the reproductive and sexual freedom of women is openly attacked in the Western world (abortion called into question in the US, in Poland, in Hungary, and perhaps soon in Italy) and little or not at all recognised in the peripheral countries, the movement for women's liberation in Iran gives a determined example of struggle which reinforces the direction of struggle of women in the countries just mentioned. It is an example which stands next to the radical democratic movements in Algeria (2019) or in Belarus (2020). This sexual revolution is born from the firm will expressed by rebellious youth (women and men) to freely live their sexuality and their feelings without them being imprisoned in the cage of marriage.

Five years after the start of #metoo which was, with much difficulty, the expression of a revival of interest in the woman question in North America and Europe, the struggle of women in Iran comes along to stick a much-needed boot into the sickening discussions on all sides on the wearing of the veil – in France particularly – and to amplify the perspective of the women's movement internationalising.

The events in Iran go beyond the usual framework of a democratic movement which has expressed itself on and off since 2009. It speaks clearly and radically of the revolt for the liberation of women and therefore, implicitly, against the family. The independent movement of women against their specific oppression is a strategic ally of the working class in the revolutionary process. Its calling is to undermine the family – a pillar of class-divided societies – and part of the process of reproduction of labour power, which relies on the subjugation of women's sexuality to the dictatorship of men. Hence its importance for class struggle.

“The oppression of women is closely related to the natural division of labour of the reproduction of the species. Childbirth is its objective foundation. This division is one of the premises of the social division between manual and intellectual labour, of the creation of social hierarchy. The natural division of labour of the reproduction of the species is congealed in the elementary social structure of reproduction (then of production) which is the family, the clan, the tribe etc. The means for reproducing the family is the same as for any other social structure: violence. A violence exercised over women, the first “asset” of man, the

first manifestation of the reification of a human being. A violence made sacred by religion.”⁶

Freedom movement and workers movement

Already for many years Iranian civil society has been at boiling point from multiple crises which rack the country: chronic economic crisis⁷ amplified by Western sanctions and the pandemic, and, following the health crisis, an environmental crisis. The explosion of anger in winter 2019-2020, caused by the end of state subsidies on fuel and drowned in the blood of more than 1,500 victims in a few days, marked a turning point. Demonstrations of opposition to the regime no longer stop, whether it is a matter of strikes – subcontractors in the oil sector, June 2021 – protests around shortages of water – Khuzestan, summer 2021 and Isfahan, November 2021 – or looting in response to the surge in the price of food: the annual inflation rate in summer 2022 surpassed 50%.

The present movement has managed to bring together all those who oppose the regime. In a country of 85 million inhabitants (of which 65% are young), 80% of the population is urban, educated, often conservative but less and less religious, even atheist, and above all lacking prospects. Yet, contrary to the defensive struggles mentioned above, concerning wages, inflation or access to water, the present movement is immediately political: the obligation to wear the *hijab* is, among the founding symbols of the regime, one of the last to have ever been called into question. The existing family in Iran is a mixture of the traditional patriarchal family and the modern monogamous family. The intolerable weight of this archaism explains the resentment, the anger and hatred felt by women, above all by those who are urbanised and educated.

⁶ See Mouvement Communiste/KpK, Bulletin no. 9, “Cologne: attacks against women are the product of patriarchal domination and play into the hands of anti-immigrant racists”: <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT1602ENVF.pdf>

⁷ The crisis of capital valorisation that we already examined in 2009 in our Letter on the “Green movement” has deepened. See: *Mouvement Communiste*, “Iran: popular discontent rises to the surface”: <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Letters/LTMC0931EN.pdf>

Also, in contrast to the “Green movement” of 2009, during which the objective, while also political, remained limited to an internal reform of the Islamic Republic, today, starting from a refusal of the obligation to wear hijab, the protesters want nothing less than the fall of the regime of the Supreme Leader, the mullahs, the *basiji* and the *pasdaran*. These young people who fight have not known anything other than the oppressor regime of the mullahs and, contrary to their elders; they have no fascination with the myth of the struggle against the dictatorial regime of the Shah.

The desire for individual and collective freedoms, the dream of sexual liberation, has completely naturally led this Iranian youth to organise itself to gain spaces of for its own expression without demanding anything from the source of their oppression, the state and the economic and social bloc which it represents. The democratic demand gives way to the alternative practice, something antagonistic, therefore political. This in many ways inter-classist movement has nevertheless created the conditions for a class polarisation – on condition that the proletariat takes up on its own terms the anger and aspirations of young people, bringing it together with the struggle of women against the family and patriarchy. It is only on this condition that the working class can assume its historic role: to free itself from wage labour and societies divided into classes, starting from the destruction of the authority of the workplace and, more widely, social relations conforming to the interests of capital.

The workers of Iran are slow to take their rightful, central, place in the struggle against the theocracy even if the first signs of mobilisation are appearing here and there, such as the strikes and blockades at the port and refinery in Asaluyeh, in the South of the country⁸. Since Monday and Tuesday 10-11 October 2022, work in the refineries of Bushehr, Borzovieh and Hemgan, then in the one in Abadan⁹ has been disrupted by the strike of subcontractor workers, the least well paid and with insecure working conditions. Tolerated in the 1990s and 2000s,

independent unions were progressively dissolved by the regime from 2009. It is difficult to know to what extent the *shura* – workers’ base committees – created in 2019 during the oil sector strike, on the model of the councils of the revolution of 1979, have maintained sufficient influence to launch a significant movement. As we write, only teachers, first of all in the secondary schools and now in the universities, are fighting collectively on the side of the insurgents.

Brussels, Paris, Prague, 15 October 2022

“With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again – and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties. And the wife’s position in the factory is the position of women in all branches of business, right up to medicine and the law. The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules.”¹⁰

- Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884

⁸ See: *Wall Street Journal*, “Iran Oil Workers Strike as Anti-government Protests Expand” in: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-oil-workers-strike-as-antigovernment-protests-expand-11665416396>

⁹ This is the oldest refinery in the Middle East, founded in 1912, and a centre of class struggle in Iran, including the strike in October-November 1978, which brought about the departure of the Shah. See: *Wall Street Journal*, “More Iran Oil Industry Workers Join Anti-government Protests”: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-iran-oil-industry-workers-join-antigovernment-protests-11665508266>

¹⁰ Chapter 2, “The Family”, 4. The Monogamous Family: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch02d.htm>