Is Regime Change Possible in Iran? A Historical Analysis of Protests

Arthur R. Adams Program in International & Strategic Studies

Christian Thomas

Abstract

The Mahsa Amini protests are the latest in a series of protests in Iran against the stringent authoritarian government established by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. These protests have several motivators but a most common thread has been the call for the removal of the current governing institution in Iran. This paper seeks to address the question: Why protests in Iran have failed to produce a regime transition, and why the outlook for Mahsa Amini protests is no better? The central argument of this paper is based on theories of regime transition that place importance on civil society and actor-centered approaches. Using qualitative evidence the paper concludes that a lack of support from critical actors has led to this continual failure to yield a regime transition. Recommendations for both Iran and the international community are also suggested including but not limited to: (1) greater analysis on what constitutes an authoritarian or autocratic state and (2) exploring the necessity for intervention in the case of an authoritarian or autocratic state.

There have been major protests in Iran every 8 years on average since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Last year, Iran experienced nationwide protests following the death of a 22 year old Kurdish Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini. Amini was detained on September 13, 2022 for wearing an improper hijab and died three days later in police custody. Although officials of Iran's morality police have denied the allegations, Amini's family and protesters claim that she died because of ill-treatment and torture. Over the next couple days, hundreds of protesters flocked to multiple cities throughout Iran from Amini's hometown of Saqqez to the Iranian capital of Tehran and would continue to rapidly escalate.[1]

Given the most recent developments in Iran and this long history of protest, will Iran experience regime change? Protests and grievances through the years have shown that at least some parts of the Iranian public have internalized high levels of discontent primarily against the stringent Islamic republican government that was established by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, tracing the history of Iran, it is clear that the government of Iran continues to have a stronghold on the Iranian society. As in other rounds of protests, I hypothesize that the Mahsa Amini protests will not lead to the deposition of the existing Iranian government because of the lack of support throughout the different classes of Iranian society from the lower class to the upper class, the military, and political elites. This argument is staked in actor-centric explanations for regime transitions, including arguments about the role of civil society and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's Selectorate Theory. I conducted this research by analyzing primary sources, secondary journal articles, and data from news sources, NGOs, and governmental organizations.

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[1] Hoog, Niels de, and Elena Morresi. "Mapping Iran's Unrest: How Mahsa Amini's Death Led to Nationwide Protests." The Guardian, 31 Oct. 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/oct/31/mapping-irans-unrest-how-mahsa-aminis-death-led-to-nationwide-protests.

I start the paper with a historical account of protests in Iran, then I continue with a review of scholarly work on regime transition following with a section on theory. I proceed with an analysis of past and current protests to support my hypothesis and conclude with policy implications highlighting the role of human rights and further study on the role of actors in regime transitions both within Iran and internationally.

Background

I will give a brief history of Iran's autocratic governance for the purpose of providing the context of this case study in Iran. By 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi had overthrown the Qajar dynasty in a coup d'état and established the Pahlavi monarchy. Reza Shah aimed to modernize Iran and implement a series of reforms, including the promotion of secularism and the modernization of the country's infrastructure. Under Reza Shah's rule, the government invested heavily in industrialization and introduced policies to diminish the influence of traditional religious establishments. Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, succeeded him in 1941 and continued his father's modernization efforts.[2]

However, the Pahlavi Dynasty faced increasing discontent among different sectors of society due to widespread dissatisfaction with the government's autocratic rule, economic inequality, and perceived Western influence in Iran. This popular resentment climaxed during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that was led by a diverse coalition of opposition groups who eventually overthrew the monarchy and established an Islamic Republic. The revolution was characterized by mass protests, strikes, and civil resistance, with a broad spectrum of Iranians participating, involving intellectuals, religious leaders, students, and the working class. The

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[2] Daneshvar, Parviz. *Revolution in Iran*. Springer, 2016.

revolution was marked by strong anti-Western sentiment, fueled partly by the perception of the

Shah as a puppet of foreign powers, particularly the United States.[3]

One of the central figures in the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an

influential Shia cleric who criticized the Shah's regime for its authoritarianism and close ties

with the West. Khomeini advocated for the establishment of an Islamic government based on the

principles of Islamic law and social justice. The revolution concluded with the Shah's departure

from Iran in January 1979 and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile. Subsequently, a

referendum was held, and an overwhelming majority of Iranians voted in favor of establishing an

Islamic Republic. The Pahlavi Dynasty came to an end, and Iran transformed into a theocratic

system with Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader.[4]

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran has witnessed several major protests that have

left a significant impact on the country's political landscape. One such instance was the Iran

Student Protests in July 1999. After the mass killings of leftists prisoners between 1981 and

1988, the Islamists leadership under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, somewhat relaxed its repression of

dissent. However, student protests and newspaper criticisms following the election of reformist

President Mohammad Khatami led to a violent crackdown on unrest and confrontation between

Iran's youth and paramilitary groups from July 8th- 13th. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC) faced minimal consequences.[5] Then, the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests, also

known as the Iranian Green Movement, erupted in the summer of 2009 when reformist

opposition accused conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of rigged re-election victory.

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[3] Milani, M.M. (1994). *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy To Islamic Republic*, Second Edition (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1201/9780429494451
[4] Halliday, Fred. *Iranian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3/4, 1995, pp. 255–58. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310953. Accessed 19 June 2023.
[5] "Iran's 1999 Student Protests: The Hot Summer That Shook Tehran." Middle East Eye, 8 July 2019, www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/irans-1999-student-protests-hot-summer-shook-tehran.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei responded brutally: his forces opened fire on marchers and dozens were killed, jailed, or tortured. Although the protestors had major demands, their calls for change remained within the framework of existing politics.[6]

Continued Iranian protests from 2017-18 and 2019-2020 were driven by anger over economic issues, corruption, and unemployment. While the 2017-18 protests expressed discontent with corruption and hoarding of wealth, the 2019-2020 protests witnessed a radicalization of the protesters and an extremely violent response from the regime, resulting in a high death toll and a total digit shutdown.[7] On September 16, 2022, nationwide protests against the Iranian government and the IRGC began after a 22 year old Kurdish Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini died in police custody. Amini was detained on September 13, 2022 for wearing an "improper hijab". There are several justifiable social and economic causes that may be causing Iranian citizens to protest their government. However, the death of Mahsa Amini has been the catalyst for the most widespread civil unrest in the nation since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The regime's repression and reliance on security forces has escalated tensions and fueled paranoia within the Islamic Republic causing ever growing requests for the removal of the current government. By examining the literature on regime transitions, I will provide evidence to support my claim that the present Iranian protests will not lead to the deposition of the existing Iranian government.

Literature Review

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[6] Keath, Lee. "2009 vs Now: How Iran's New Protests Compare to the Past." AP NEWS, 3 Jan. 2018, apnews.com/article/ali-khamenei-ap-top-news-elections-international-news-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-ab649e2190834e19b1f006f76493645f.

[7] Shahi, Afshin, and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi. "Iran's 2019–2020 Demonstrations: The Changing Dynamics of Political Protests in Iran." Asian Affairs, vol. 51, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2020.1712889.

In this section I will present a review of scholarly work on regime transition. Regime transition occurs when a nation's current governmental actors and institutions are replaced by a new set of controlling individuals, groups, or organizations. The most common types of regime changes are authoritarian to another authoritarian regime, authoritarian to democratic regime (known as democratization), and authoritarian to democratic and then back to an authoritarian rule. Many authors, IR theorists, and political scientists have written about the occurrence of regime transitions, democratization, and the factors necessary for a regime change. They use various approaches to explain regime transition, such as analyzing a country's transformation mechanisms, identifying structural causes, examining the key actors and triggers involved; or studying the outcomes of a regime change.

The early approaches to regime transition in the 70s stressed the importance of economic development on democratization. This school of thought known as the functionalists became heavily criticized for this narrow focus and its failure to explain transitions from communism in Eastern Europe. In the same vein, structuralists consider economic factors important to regime transition but expand further to include political, social, and domestic or international influences.

Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman are two structuralists who highlighted this notion of regime transition being induced by various factors. They suggested that the success of democratization is influenced by repression by the old regime, the capacity of social movements, history of military coups, and the strength of political institutions.[8] Despite this, it is important to note that both social and political revolutions regularly result in authoritarian rule. Some political

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[8] Haggard, Stephan, and Robert R. Kaufman. *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change*. Princeton University Press, 2016. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1q1xs6z. Accessed 11 June 2023.

revolutions, in comparison with social revolutions, do lead to democracy as the incumbent regimes are not as probable to overthrow the entire social order and are often less violent.[9]

The structuralists economic approach considers actors beyond regime elites and opposition groups.[10][11] Also economically, the availability of material resources to key actors and the costs of transition influence the likelihood of a regime transition.[12] Internationally, regimes closely connected to the West tend to have more successful transitions due to the diffusion of successful practices observed in other connect countries.[13] The determination of the international power system to change a regime also plays a role. Domestically, variables such as country size, religious composition, societal fractionalization, colonial heritage, social capital can be significant factors in regime change.[14]

Moreover, structuralists have written about how regime transitions are usually promoted by specific triggers and are influenced by various conditions. In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, two notable events acted as triggers for regime change. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the mass protest on 'Police Day' in Egypt served as significant catalysts for the uprisings. These events, characterized by popular discontent, symbolized the broader grievances of the people, and ignited a swell of mass protests. Transitions to democracy are often triggered by some particular event, such as a natural disaster, economic crisis, major change in

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[9] https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/107832_book_item_107832.pdf
[10] Teorell, Jan. *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006.* Cambridge University Press, 2010.
[11] Rabiei, Kamran. "Protest and Regime Change: Different Experiences of the Arab Uprisings and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests." International Studies, vol. 57, no. 2, 2020, pp. 144–170, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881720913413.
[12] Jung, Dong-Joon. "Lessons from the Thirty Years of Postcommunist Regime Transitions and Democratization for the Future North Korea." Journal of International and Area Studies, vol. 26, no. 1, 2019, pp. 21–42. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26909951. Accessed 10 June 2023.
[13] Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[14] Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*

the global context or international support of the old regime, massive civilian protests, or death of a personalist dictator.[15]

Social and political dynamics play a meaningful role in the arguments of structuralists regarding regime transitions too. According to Seymour Lipset, countries that have undergone extensive societal modernization, that can be characterized at times by the presence of NGOs; diverse media; and modern technologies, are more likely to become democratic.[16] Another perspective suggests that the working and middle class are the primary proponents of democracy. Factors such as the demand for political participation, resistance from a dictatorial minority group, long-term dictatorship leading to a legitimacy crisis and systematic pressures for change, and governmental and financial corruption involving the leaders' family members and associates contributed to the political and social democratization of Tunisia and Egypt. Additionally, years of modernization trends, the preparation for urban protests, widespread dissatisfaction among the youth, and social and regional inequality played a part.[17] While the motivations of actors regarding outcomes are not the primary focus of regime transition structuralists,[18] this limitation has prompted scholars to explore more actor-centric approaches.[19]

Actors, particularly political elites, play a critical role in regime transitions, as highlighted by several scholars. In regime transitions, the lack of support from religious elites and principal religious institutions for the political regime can weaken its legitimacy and create

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[15] https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/107832_book_item_107832.pdf

[16] Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." The American Political Science Review, vol. 53, no. 1, 1959, pp. 69–105. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731. Accessed 10 June 2023.

[17] Rabiei, Kamran. "Protest and Regime Change: Different Experiences of the Arab Uprisings and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests," 144–170.

[18] Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*

[19] Jung, Dong-Joon. "Lessons from the Thirty Years of Postcommunist Regime Transitions and Democratization for the Future North Korea," 21–42.

an environment conducive to change. Contrary to popular belief, it is often key elites rather than the populace as a whole who reject democracy during times of economic crisis, as noted by Nancy Bermeo.[20] The success of regime transitions also hinges on the ability of opposing political forces to negotiate and create a pact, involving actors, such as the military, secular opposition forces, and Islamists groups who demonstrate varying degrees of willingness to participate in a democratic process, as seen during the Arab Spring.[21] O'Donnell and Schmitter emphasize that the initiation of this process does not require many structural prerequisites but heavily relies on agency and strategic decision-making, particularly among political elites.[22] Additionally, for regime transitions to occur, there typically must be some division within the authoritarian regime itself,[23] further underscoring the significance of key actors in shaping political transformations.

The military is frequently a decisive participant/actor in regime transitions. Although revolutionary regimes tend to be more durable due to the elimination of independent power centers, powerful ruling parties, and strong coercive capability,[24] the military's stance can determine the success or failure of a revolution.[25] In Egypt and Tunisia, the military refrained from using force against the protesters, which contributed to the downfall of the regimes. However, the military's role in Iran during the Green Movement in 2009 was more complex.

[20] Bermeo, Nancy. *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2003. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10h9d4p. Accessed 11 June 2023.
[21] https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/107832_book_item_107832.pdf
[22] MacEwan, Arthur. *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1988, pp. 115–30. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633794. Accessed 11 June 2023.
[23] MacEwan, Arthur. *Latin American Perspectives*, 115–30.
[24] Fatollah-Nejad, Ali. "The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis." Brookings Doha Center, Apr. 2020, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-Four-Decades-On-English-Web.pdf.
[25] https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/107832_book_item_107832.pdf

Ayatollah Khamenei wielded supreme power and the military was divided into the army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) whose second major duty of guarding the Islamic Revolution was clearly defined in its Articles of Association.[26] In some cases, the military may facilitate a top-down managed transition, becoming the cornerstone of the new regime.[27]

Authors such as Juan Linz and Alfred Stephan, and then later Vladimir Gel'man, have delved into the different modes of transitions. According to the ideal model of regime transition, reaction to triggering events should result in a pact: an explicit agreement between critical political actors in the regime and civil society to establish a new form of government.[28] While this explicit agreement helps to navigate the uncertainties and challenges of the transition process leading to the formation of a democratic system, regime transition scholars consider other factors regarding outcomes of political change.

The scholarship of Geddes, Wright, and Franz focuses on different types of regime transitions as well as the mode. They further communicate that the likelihood of democratization is higher for military dictatorships compared to personalist dictatorships and external coercion, such as international pressure, plays a significant role in dominant party regimes.[29] As Gel'man said, "In summary, the outcome of conflicts during the process of regime change is conditioned, but not determined, by a set of interrelated exogenous factors, such as the political opportunity structure in general and the legacy of the past in particular, and endogenous factors, such as the

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[26] Rabiei, Kamran. "Protest and Regime Change: Different Experiences of the Arab Uprisings and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests," 144–170.

[27] Zgurić, Borna. "Challenges for Democracy in Countries Affected by the 'Arab Spring.'" Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, vol. 23, no. 4, 2012, pp. 417–434, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.712455.

[28] https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/107832_book_item_107832.pdf

[29] Geddes, Barbara, et al. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," 313–331

elite structure, the distribution of resources among and between actors, the effects of institutions, and the relative costs of strategies of coercion and cooperation."[30]

The scholarly work on regime transition is quite extensive and encompassing. However, much of this work is too generalized, does not direct enough attention towards when regime transitions do not occur, and does not attribute proper significance to the role the social atmosphere of a country plays in causing a major change in the governing establishment of that nation. Structural economic arguments and opinions surrounding the conditions of regime transition are often broad and do not consider the specific elements that should be applied to each country's case that has gone through a regime transition. Further, for a truly comprehensive examination of regime transition, as my case study of Iran should demonstrate, one must analyze the reasons behind when regime transition will not happen and not just when it might. The present Iranian case will demonstrate that without the support of distinct portions of society, a regime transition is bound to fail or never be instigated.

Theory/Hypothesis

As suggested by the literature review section: the Mahsa Amini protests will not lead to the deposition of the existing Iranian government because of the lack of support throughout the different classes of Iranian society from the lower class to the upper class, the military, and political elites. A central theory of regime transitions focuses on actor-centric explanations for why these changes occur. More specifically, positive involvement of the military and political

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[30] Gel'Man, Vladimir. "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire? Post-Soviet Regime Changes in Comparative Perspective." International Political Science Review, vol. 29, no. 2, 2008, pp. 157–180, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512107085610.

elites is highlighted as being a necessary factor in regime transitions. Agency within the society

is also cited at times in this body of work for playing a part in replacing one government with

another.

When exploring actor/elite involvement in regime transition, the work of Bruce Bueno

de Mesquita and his selectorate theory provide important insight on why some autocratic regimes

are able to stay in power. According to the selectorate theory there are two main groups; the

selectorate (S) which is composed of the general populace of a nation and the winning coalition

(W) which is a smaller group within S that chooses and supports the leader of that nation.

> Consequently, a revolution against an autocratic system in which W is highly exclusive
> and S is large, is bound to face a great challenge in trying to change the order and enlarge
> the coalition and the selectorate. This is because members of the coalition enjoy most of
> the public and private goods and will try to maintain the status quo.[31]

Currently, the Iranian winning coalition is small and rather restricted, serving as a great

example of the case description above. In fact, this winning coalition is just composed of the

Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the IRGC, and a few other elite political actors who have

and will continue to be enticed to retain their share of power and public and private goods. As a

result, it is to no surprise that the regime has been able to stay in power and withhold pressure

from the masses. I plan to present how in each of the previous Iranian protests, the

demonstrations have been quelled due to failure of the civil society to retain momentum and/or

not fully engage with these movements as well as oppressive responses by the military and

political elites.

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[31] Rabaia, Ibrahim S., et al. "Religion and Revolution: Theorizing of the Arab Spring in Accordance with the Selectorate Approach." Asian Politics & Policy, vol. 9, no. 2, 26 Apr. 2017, pp. 222–244, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12317.

Analysis

In this section I will describe why the previous Iranian protests have failed and how the outlook for the Mahsa Amini protest is barely better. Although all of these protests are distinct, there has been a common element in every one that has led to the unsuccessful outcome of no regime transition taking place: there has been a lack of support from all of Iranian civil society, the military, or political elites. An especially damaging fact and part of the regime transition process in Iran has been the separation between the Iranian Army and the IRGC and the use of special police forces, namely the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah, by the Iranian regime. The IRGC has harshly suppressed every Iranian protest since the Iran Student Protests of 1999 without opposition from the Iranian Army because of the IRGC's political support from the stringent Islamic regime.[32]

The largest student protests since the revolution, occurred in July 1999 following the closing of the Salaam reformist newspaper.[33] Despite hundreds of thousands of apolitical Iranians showing support for the students during the Student Protests, five days known as *Fajeh Kuye Daneshgah* or "tragedy of the university dormitory", several people were killed, more than two hundred were injured, and hundreds more were arrested.[34] In seeking control during this reformist era, conservatives enlisted semistate and nonstate militant actors, mainly the Basij and

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[32] Rabiei, Kamran. "Protest and Regime Change: Different Experiences of the Arab Uprisings and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests," 144–170.

[33] A. Akbar Mahdi, "The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis 15, no. 2 (1999), available at http://go.owu.edu/~aamahdi/students.htm

[34] Rahimi, B. (2018). Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How It Might Succeed. Contemporary Sociology, 47(6), 742–744. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306118805422jj

Ansar-e Hezbollah.[35]As Misagh Parsa explained, political repression and the actions of the IRGC would not allow the civil unrest to continue.[36]

In the aftermath of the July 1999 protests President Khatami expressed sympathy for the students and denounced the regime's response at the university dormitories. However, this sentiment was not shared by members of the IRGC and senior military commanders who issued a warning to President Khatami stating, "…if you do not fulfill your Islamic and national mission today, tomorrow will be far too late…In the end, we would like to express our utmost respect for your excellency and to declare that our patience has run out."[37] The letter by these military officials to President Khatami further reflects Parsa's analysis that going forward, repression would be the response to protests.

The second major Iranian protest since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 started on June 13th, 2009, following the presidential election on June 12th when incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, and lasted until June 16th. These protests have been called "The Green Movement," owing to the official color of the Mousavi (one of the two defeated candidates) electoral campaign.[38] Iran's middle class, political elite, pundits, and activists formed the core of the 2009 protests.[39] Here it is noteworthy to mention that the only parties and

[35] Golkar, Saeid. "Protests and Regime Suppression in Post-Revolutionary Iran." The Washington Institute, 8 Oct. 2020, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/protests-and-regime-suppression-post-revolutionary-iran.

[36] Rahimi, B, *Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How It Might Succeed*, 742–744.

[37] Aydıntaşbaş, Pavel K. Baev, and Jeannie Sowers Gabriela Nagle Alverio. "Remembering Iran's Student Protests, Fourteen Years Later." Brookings, 29 July 2016, www.brookings.edu/articles/remembering-irans-student-protests-fourteen-years-later/.

[38] Filin, Nikita. "The Green Movement in Iran: 2009–2010." Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century: The New Waves of Revolutions, and the Causes and Effects of Disruptive Political Change, Springer, Cham, 2023, pp. 571–592.

[39] Rasanah, et al. "Historical Trajectory of the Protest Movement in Iran." International Institute for Iranian Studies, 18 Oct. 2022, rasanah-iiis.org/english/monitoring-and-translation/reports/historical-trajectory-of-the-protest-movement-in-iran/.

organizations that can legally function in Iran are those having official programs that support

Islamic norms enshrined in the Constitution. For example, the president's power is subordinate to

the power of the country's spiritual leader, who is granted substantial authority to rule the state.

In order to become a presidential candidate, one must obtain permission from the Guardian

Council. According to Nikita Filin, "This was one of the reasons why the 2009 protests were so

weak, since the institutional environment of the Iranian political system did not allow finding

significant support for the protesters."[40] Moreover, the regime tried to curb the momentum of

protests, with help from special police forces, like the Basij organization and the Ansar-e

Hezbollah party, by coercive strategies that involved extrajudicial killings, torture, mass arrests,

purges, defamation campaigns against opposition figures and harsh censorship practices.[41]

 Opposition to the Iranian regime estimates that 110 Green Movement supporters were

killed from June 2009 to March 2010 and Amnesty International estimates say that by the end of

2009, more than 5,000 people had been detained in various cities. Also, the Iranian regime

hardliners often blamed the U.S. and western powers for these internal challenges. During the

2009 Iranian presidential protest/Iranian green movement, political elites and the urban-middle

class led the demonstrations but the rest of Iranian civil society did not follow.[42] Lack of support

from all of Iranian civil society coupled with the brutal response from the IRGC ultimately put

the 2009 Iranian presidential protest to an end. The wholesale suppression of the Green

Movement, involving mass arrests and spurring wide-scale emigration, chilled Iranian society.[43]

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[40] Filin, Nikita, "The Green Movement in Iran: 2009–2010," 571–592.

[41] Tezcür Güneş Murat. "Democracy Promotion, Authoritarian Resiliency, and Political Unrest in Iran." Democratization, vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 120–140., https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.641296

[42] Rabiei, Kamran. "Protest and Regime Change: Different Experiences of the Arab Uprisings and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election Protests," 144–170.

[43] Golkar, Saeid. "Protests and Regime Suppression in Post-Revolutionary Iran."

The 2017-18 Iranian protest took place between December 28th, 2017 and January 3rd, 2018 (or during Dey 1396, according to the Iranian calendar) was more radical than previous protests. Moreover, the protests involved mainly economically disposed youth and members of the lower-middle class and has been referred to as "Tazahorat-e Sarasari" which is Farsi for "Protests Everywhere" or the Dey Protests. The Dey Protests were fueled by anger over a still-faltering economy, unemployment, and corruption and occurred in mainly mid-size cities and towns. The 2017-18 protests eventually died down as a result of repression by the coercive apparatus of the regime and the lack of active involvement by other parts of the middle class, due to reasons including fear of reprisal or destabilization, as well as class resentment.[44]

   As typically done by the regime, Supreme Leader Khamenei blamed the Islamic Republic's enemies for the protests. The reformist and centrist "moderate" wing of the elite was overwhelmingly skeptical, if not openly hostile to the Dey Protests" also citing Iran's foreign enemies as initiating the conflict.[45] Figures like former President Mohammad Khatami and Ahmad Batebi, a prominent figure in the 1999 student protests, had either failed on their promises of reform or changed their minds on reformists principles discouraged by the belief that the regime was not reformable. A key reason for this behavior from Iranian political elites was the fact that the protests saw the lower-middle class targeting all political elites, whereas in the 2009 protests, the urban middle class supported the reformists. As Saeid Golkar pointed out regarding the reformists' inability to act as agents for change in the Islamic Republic, "they have refrained from challenging the material foundations of the system, while continuing the benefit

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[44] Saeid Golkar, "Iran's Coercive Apparatus: Capacity and Desire," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2909, January 5, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-coercive-apparatus-capacity-and-desire.
[45] Saeid Golkar, "Iran's Coercive Apparatus: Capacity and Desire."

from it."[46] The response to the Dey Protests was also unprecedented, with a bloody crackdown

resulting in the deaths of up to 1,500 protesters, about 4-7,000 jailed, and an uncounted number

injured.[47] Iran experienced:

> A striking lack of political freedoms, including: (1) the political repression of
> dissidents, minorities, women, students, workers, and their respective social
> movements; (2) the world's highest execution rate; (3) press censorship; (4) a record-
> breaking journalist detention rate; and (5) the violent restriction of cultural and
> academic freedoms by ultra-conservative pressure groups.[48]

The 2017-18 Iranian protests involved hundreds, or at most several thousand as opposed

to hundreds or thousands or millions, and with no clear leadership and dark memories from the

crackdown of the of the 2009 green movement, it did not yield a regime transition.[49]

The 2019-2020 Iranian protests drew hundreds of thousands protesting the substantial

increase in oil prices and desperate economic and political conditions in the country. The regime

responded by instigating a week-long total digital shutdown causing the majority of Iranians to

lose internet access. The poorer segments of the Iranian population took part in the 2019 protests,

while the elite did not. The youth, students, women, and middle-class segments also participated

in the 2019 protests.[50] According to the political director of the IRGC, General Yadol'lāh

Javānī, all but two out of 31 Iranian provinces participated in the protests. Around 10 provinces

saw massive and brutal street-fighting, while the rest experienced limited and minor

clashes. Security officials had also acknowledged that at least 200,000 Iranians took part in the

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[46] Borzou Daragahi, "Here's Why Iran's Middle Class Is Mostly Sitting Out the Protests," BuzzFeed News, January 3, 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/borzoudaragahi/irans-middle-class-is-sitting-out-the-protests

[47] "Iran lawmaker says some 3,700 arrested amid protests, unrest," Associated Press, January 9, 2018, https://apnews.com/b38eadd6615e486cbf0d6ff22284a249

[48] ("World press freedom index 2014," Reporters Without Borders, accessed July 5, 2023, https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2014.

[49] Keath, Lee. "2009 vs Now: How Iran's New Protests Compare to the Past."

[50] Rasanah, et al. "Historical Trajectory of the Protest Movement in Iran."

protests and 7,000 of them had, so far, been arrested.[51] The IRGC professional anti-riot units and

Basij militiamen were deployed to shore up the police force and in many areas, the state used

tanks, heavy armour, helicopters, and machine guns to regain control.[52]

Amnesty International estimated between 300 and 400 protestor deaths and Reuters

claimed there about 1,500 deaths. Afshin Shahi and Abdoh-Tabrizi analyzed the situation stating:

> The regime's discourse will remain repetitive and stagnant. It will lead to a maximization
> of the already rampant paranoia politics of the regime, which serves its policy of
> increased repression…Under current circumstances, the Islamic Republic's operational
> response to the protests' willingness to take matters onto the streets can only be total
> repression, with a high reliance on the security forces and a further escalation of
> violence.[53]

Mohammad Fazeli, an Iranian sociology professor, claimed that most of those arrested

since the 2019 uprising live in shantytowns and hold no more than a high school diploma.[54]

Once again participation from a large portion of Iranian civil society did not produce a regime

transition due to the lack of assistance from the Iranian military or political elites.

Turning to the ongoing Mahsa Amini protests, despite signs of hope, the likelihood of a

complete regime transition in Iran appear slim. Mahsa Amini died in custody of the Iranian

Guidance Patrol (*est*. 2005) otherwise known as the morality police or *Gasht-e-Ershad* in Farsi

and protestors alleged that the young woman died due to ill-treatment in custody. The rallies

around Amini's death involved big sections of Iran's society and even members of the Iranian

Army. However, larger fragments of Iran's different classes did not show opposition to the

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[51] Shahi, Afshin, and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi. "Iran's 2019–2020 Demonstrations: The Changing Dynamics of Political Protests in Iran," 1-41.
[52] Shahi, Afshin, and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi. "Iran's 2019–2020 Demonstrations: The Changing Dynamics of Political Protests in Iran," 1–41.
[53] Shahi, Afshin, and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi. "Iran's 2019–2020 Demonstrations: The Changing Dynamics of Political Protests in Iran," 1–41.
[54] Iranian Students Polling Association, "Meeting to Review the Social Logic of the November 2019 Protests," December 18, 2019, https://bit.ly/3hZhetb

existing Iranian regime and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Additionally, political elites remained steadfastly loyal to Ali Khomeini the Supreme Leader of Iran.[55]

The Mahsa Amini protest were unquestionably widespread and nationwide, involving various ethnic and religious groups. The government's brutal response to the protests fueled its spread across society's strata and regions in the country. Students also joined these protests in universities across the country.[56] As stressed by Mariasophia Falcone, "This aspect is probably a result of Amini's identity itself as a young girl, and from a rural area, making her a strong unifying symbol and favouring the identification by many outside the capital…members of the military have deserted and joined the protests, feeling that the ideals of the regime have failed them as well."[57] As a consequence during the course of the protests, over 400 violent demonstrations against the regime were reported and overall, at least 46 Basij, IRGC, and police personnel were killed, during violent demonstrations between mid-September and December 2022.[58]

Nonetheless, the demonstrations in the capital Tehran, mostly supported by the middle-upper class, did not receive great support despite the discomfort of the broad masses[59] as Dana Sammy admitted:

> Nationwide demonstrations largely faded away in 2023, and there are no signs that the Iranian regime faces an immediate threat of collapse. The latest round of demonstrations did not evolve into an organized movement, lacking coordination, leadership, and strategy…With the absence of leadership offering a concrete political roadmap for the

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[55] Sammy, Dana. "Anti-Government Demonstrations in Iran: A Long-Term Challenge for the Islamic Republic." Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 12 Apr. 2023, pp. 1–11.
[56] Koli, Anisha. "Here's What Has Happened in Iran Since the Death of Mahsa Amini." Time, 8 Oct. 2022, pp. 1–1.
[57] Falcone, Mariasophia. "Could the Mahsa Amini Protests Be a Turning Point for Iran?" The Federalist Debate, vol. 35, no. 11, 2022, pp. 33–35. 3.
[58] Sammy, Dana. "Anti-Government Demonstrations in Iran: A Long-Term Challenge for the Islamic Republic," 1–11.
[59] UYGUR, HAKKI. "Iran in the Wake of Mahsa Amini's Death." Insight Turkey, vol. 24, no. 4, 2022, pp. 11–22. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48706285. Accessed 27 June 2023.

future and a viable alternative to the Islamic Republic, many remain wary of demands for an end to the regime…Moreover, calls for strikes went largely unheeded by significant sectors, including bazaar merchants and oil workers, groups that were instrumental in toppling the Pahlavi regime in 1979.[60]

The analysis by Sammy suggests that there did not seem to be significant encouragement by Iran's political elites for the Mahsa Amini protests. Additionally, Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh pointed out that, "[The Islamic Republic's] working-class enforcers often come from religious families…Even within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, the country's elite military force, conscripts may represent more than half the corps."[61] Unfortunately, even though the Mahsa Amini protests were supported by civil society, there were not enough of them to sustain pressure on the government and withstand the extreme response by the regime:

> More than five hundred protesters have suffered serious eye injuries after security forces fired "bird-shot"—rubber bullets or metal pellets—at their heads. Medical records from several hospitals and clinics show that the range of injuries includes mutilated retinas, severed optic nerves, and punctured irises. Many protesters have no choice but to seek treatment in government-run health-care facilities, which are often patrolled by security forces. Some of the wounded have been denied treatment, and others have been arrested after surgery, according to lawyers and doctors.[62]

To make matters grimmer, the Iranian regime's response to demonstrations has been as severe as ever, with little meaningful obstruction from the global community. For instance, according to an investigation by Amnesty International on September 21, 2022, Iran's top-level military authorities gave orders to security forces in all provinces to "severely confront troublemakers and anti-revolutionaries". As a result, on September 30, 2022, at least 66 deaths took place in Zahedan, the capital of the Sistan and Baluchestan province of Iran. Security forces

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[60] Sammy, Dana. "Anti-Government Demonstrations in Iran: A Long-Term Challenge for the Islamic Republic," 1–11.
[61] Gerecht, Reuel Marc, and Ray Takeyh. "How Iran's Regime Is Threatened by Its Cleries: A New Wrinkle in the Islamic Republic's Continuing Political Crisis." Commentary, vol. 155, no. 4, Apr. 2023, pp. 25–28.
[62] "Blinding Injustice." Commonwealth, vol. 150, no. 4, Apr. 2023, pp. 32–37.

reportedly deployed live ammunition and metal pellets on protestors, worshippers, and bystanders after Friday prayers outside the city's main mosque.[63] Lastly, it is difficult to imagine any sort of legitimate foreign intervention especially when considering that sanctions by countries like the U.S., Germany, France, Canada have been largely symbolic, as their primary focus remains restoring the 2015 nuclear deal[64]. Moreover, Iran has limited the reach of European countries, who have traditionally served as mediators in using diplomacy to broker deals with the regime, by supporting Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Consequently, the lack of support from a sufficient part of civil society, the military, and political elites, indicate that the Mahsa Amini protests will not lead to a regime transition similar to how previous civil unrest in Iran has been ineffectual.

Policy Implications

Policy implications and recommendations can be drawn from this research. Firstly, it is crucial for the international community to closely monitor the situation in Iran and condemn any human rights violations or violence against protesters. Diplomatic pressure can be exerted to encourage the Iranian government to respect the rights of its citizens and engage in meaningful dialogue with opposition groups. Additionally, support for civil society organizations and human rights defenders within Iran can help amplify their voices and aid those affected by the regime's repression.

More specifically, implementing more stringent economic sanctions on the members of Iran's winning coalition will serve as a clear indication to these actors that their suppression of the selectorate will not go unnoticed and unpunished. Subsequently, their ability to enjoy the

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[63] Koli, Anisha. "Here's What Has Happened in Iran Since the Death of Mahsa Amini," 1–1.
[64] UYGUR, HAKKI. "Iran in the Wake of Mahsa Amini's Death," 11–22.

privileges of power and access public and private resources will be significantly hampered.[65] Additionally, citizens residing in Western nations, such as Europe or the United States, can help by exerting pressure on their respective congressional or parliamentary representatives. The objective is to encourage them to act against Iran and its militant factions, including the IRGC and Ansar-e Hezbollah, by designating them as terrorist organizations. This approach would enable more substantial punitive measures to be undertaken against the Iran regime's repression of its populace.[66] In the event that the aforementioned steps fail to deter the Iranian regime, the international community should carefully assess the severity of the situation within Iran and explore potential avenues for intervention.

Conclusion

In summary, this research paper provides valuable insights into the pivotal role played by the ongoing protests in Iran and their consequential implications for regime transition. It recognizes the significance of the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran without implying ungrounded expectations for the future governance of Iran's citizens. It emphasizes the imperative of undertaking measures against authoritarian or autocratic regimes, including potential international intervention, when deemed essential in response to the nature of the authoritarian or autocratic state. The paper discusses protests that have taken place since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, including the recent nationwide demonstrations triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini. By examining the literature on regime transitions, the paper argues that while the protests reflect

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[65] Rabaia, Ibrahim S., et al. "Religion and Revolution: Theorizing of the Arab Spring in Accordance with the Selectorate Approach," 222–244.

[66] Abramowitz, Michael, and Goli Ameri. "How to Support Iran's Democracy Movement." *Freedom House*, 7 Feb. 2023, freedomhouse.org/article/how-support-irans-democracy-movement.

deep-seated grievances and growing demands for a change in government, the existing Iranian regime is likely to maintain its grip on power. The regime's repression and reliance on security forces, along with the absence of a unified opposition and external support for regime change, contribute to the assessment that the current protests will not lead to the deposition of the government.

Throughout the process of writing this paper, I have faced challenges in accessing a comprehensive range of information about the impact and response of the Mahsa Amini protests, which are currently ongoing. Additionally, striking a balance between concise and nuanced writing has proven difficult as I aim to effectively explain the nature of each protest, the reasons for their individual failures, and the distinctive aspects of the Iranian case. Further study is warranted in several areas related to the Iranian protests and regime transitions. First, an in-depth analysis of the role of external actors, such as regional powers or international organizations, in influencing regime dynamics would provide valuable insights into the potential for external intervention. Additionally, studying the evolution of social and political movements within Iran, their strategies, and their ability to mobilize and sustain momentum would contribute to a better understanding of the prospects for regime change. Finally, comparative studies of other successful and unsuccessful regime transitions can offer valuable lessons and frameworks for analyzing the Iranian case, helping to refine predictions and identify potential pathways for change.

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