

Why Iranian Women Are Taking Off Their Head Scarves



On Dec. 27, Vida Movahed stood bareheaded on a utility box on one of Tehran's busiest thoroughfares, waving her white head scarf on a stick. Within days, images of the 31-year-old, who was detained and then released a few weeks later, had become an iconic symbol.

In the weeks since Ms. Movahed's peaceful protest of the compulsory hijab, long one of the most visible symbols of the Islamic Republic, dozens of women, and even some men, throughout Iran have followed her lead. So far, at least 29 women in cities throughout the country have been arrested.

These bold acts of defiance against the hijab are unprecedented in the nearly 40-year history of the Islamic Republic, but a movement that may have helped inspire them has been going on for years. It began on the social media account of a Brooklyn-based Iranian journalist named Masih Alinejad. In 2014, Ms. Alinejad started a Facebook page called "My Stealthy Freedom," urging women to post images of themselves without the hijab in public places. Last year, she launched "White Wednesdays," inviting women to wear white scarves on Wednesdays in protest of the compulsory hijab law. (Ms. Movahed carried out her protest on a Wednesday and held a white scarf, though her actual allegiance to Ms. Alinejad's campaign is unknown).

Ms. Alinejad, who worked as a journalist in Iran before emigrating to England in 2009, says her campaign came about by chance. She posted a photo of herself driving her car in Iran without hijab and invited others to share "hidden photos" of themselves on her Facebook page. The overwhelming response "the page now has more than a million followers" prompted her to focus more on the issue. "I was a political reporter, but the women in Iran forced me to care about the issue of personal freedoms," she told me. For Ms. Alinejad and the protesters, the struggle against the compulsory hijab is about regaining a woman's control over her own body, not a matter of questioning the validity of the hijab itself. Now that bareheaded women are joined in these acts by women who proudly wear the full-body chador, it is clear that the movement on the ground is also about a woman's right to choose how to dress "something that, over the past century, various Iranian leaders have tried to deny.

The founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, banned the hijab, in a gesture of modernization, in 1936, which effectively put some women under house arrest for years since they could not bear to be uncovered in public. The leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, made the hijab compulsory in 1979.

Mass protests by women were unsuccessful in overturning the edict. Pro-hijab campaigners invented the slogan "Ya rusari ya tusari," which means "Either a cover on the head or a beating," and supervisory "committees" often composed of women in full chadors "roamed the streets and punished women they deemed poorly covered. Those who opposed the strict measure called these enforcer women "Fati commando," a derogatory term that combines Islam "in the nickname Fati for Fatemeh, the prophet's

daughter ? and vigilantism.

While the requirements have remained firmly in place, Iranian women have been pushing the boundaries of acceptable hijab for years. Coats have gotten shorter and more fitted and some head scarves are as small as bandannas. This has not gone without notice or punishment: Hijab-related arrests are common and numerous. In 2014, Iranian police announced that 'bad hijab' had led to 3.6 million cases of police intervention.

But for years, many women's rights activists have written off the hijab as secondary to other matters such as political or gender equality rights. In 2006, the One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws campaign, one of the most concerted efforts undertaken by Iranian feminists to gain greater rights for women, barely mentions the hijab. Iranian feminists have also been determined to distance themselves from the Western obsession with the hijab, almost overcompensating by minimizing its significance. Western feminists who have visited Iran and willingly worn the hijab have also played a hand in normalizing it. But fighting discriminatory policies has not resulted in any real change, as the crushed One Million Signatures campaign proved. So now Ms. Alinejad and a younger generation of Iranian women are turning back the focus on the most visible symbol of discrimination, which, they argue, is also the most fundamental. 'We are not fighting against a piece of cloth,' Ms. Alinejad told me. 'We are fighting for our dignity. If you can't choose what to put on your head, they won't let you be in charge of what is in your head, either.' In contrast, Islamic Republic officials argue that the hijab bestows dignity on women.

The government has had a mixed response to the protests. On the day that Vida Movahed climbed on the utility box to protest the hijab, Tehran's police chief announced that going forward, women would no longer be detained for bad hijab, but would be 'educated.' In early January, in response to recent weeks of unrest throughout the country, President Hassan Rouhani went so far as to say, 'One cannot force one's lifestyle on the future generations.' In the past week, faced with a growing wave of civil disobedience, Iran's general prosecutor called the actions of the women 'childish' and the Tehran police said that those who were arrested were 'deceived by the 'no-hijab' campaign.'

But these young women appear undeterred. Their generation is empowered by a new media ecosystem, one that not only unites protesters but also helps to spread potent images of defiance. Ms. Alinejad believes that the movement has already, in a sense, succeeded. 'Women are showing that they are no longer afraid,' she said. 'We used to fear the government, now it's the government that fears women.'