

Women in Iran are pulling off their headscarves ? and hoping for a ?turning point?



Iranian women have been raising a new challenge to their Islamic government, breaking one of its most fundamental rules by pulling off their headscarves in some of the busiest public squares and brandishing them in protest.

While these guerrilla protesters number only in the dozens, Iran's government has taken notice of their audacity. On Thursday, planned demonstrations to coincide with International Women's Day were preempted by a heavy police presence on the streets of the capital, Tehran.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, marked the day with sharply worded tweets skewering Western countries for the immodesty of their women and trumpeting the virtues of the headscarf, or hijab.

?By promoting modest dress (#hijab), #Islam has blocked the path which would lead women to such a deviant lifestyle,? Khamenei tweeted in English. ?Iranian women today, declare their . . . independence and export it to the world while preserving their -#hijab.?

It was precisely the opposite message that one young woman hoped to send when she climbed atop a tall, metal utility box on a Tehran sidewalk in January and took off her headscarf, hoisting it overhead on a stick for all to see.

?I was really stressed,? said the woman, an artist who because of safety concerns asked not to be identified by her name. Instead, she called herself ?Azadeh,? which means ?one who is free? in Farsi. ?At the same time, I felt powerful. People aren't used to seeing women without veils.?

As she held her headscarf aloft, passersby snapped photos on their phones and urged her to come down before police arrived. Headscarves are mandatory, and her lone protest was against the law.

She escaped without incident, but not before her photo spread across social media, inspiring others to do the same.

In recent months, dozens of Iranian women like Azadeh have staged similar demonstrations against the compulsory veil, standing bareheaded atop raised utility cabinets and concrete benches in some of Iran's most popular squares. They have been arrested, harassed and even charged with crimes ? but also celebrated by reformists and other Iranians who have been sharing the women's photographs on social media.

Iran is one of two countries that legally require women to wear head coverings in public, along with Saudi Arabia, though the practice is widely followed in other Middle Eastern and South Asian countries.

The hijab protests, which come amid general discontent in Iran over the economy and other social ills, have fueled the debate over the treatment of women and strict moral codes inside Iran.

Iranian activists had called for demonstrations Thursday, but activists and journalists described a large deployment of police in central Tehran, where officers conducted body searches and security vehicles blocked some streets. Social media reported some arrests, but these were not independently confirmed.

In his tweets, Khamenei praised Islam for keeping women "modest" and in defined roles as educators and child-bearers. "The features of today's Iranian woman include modesty, chastity, eminence, protecting herself from abuse by men," Khamenei tweeted. In the West, he said, "the most sought after characteristics of a #woman involve her ability to physically attract men."

The stakes for both sides of the debate are high. The veil has served as one of the most potent and visible symbols of the Islamic republic, a system in which ultimate authority resides with unelected theocrats.

But for many in a post-revolution generation that is more educated and tech-savvy, such restrictions are discriminatory and oppressive.

"The compulsory veiling of women in public — be they religious or not — has been a hallmark of Iranian political and social life since 1979," said Behnam Ben Taleblu, senior Iran analyst at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington. "As life in Iran continues to be punctuated by political and social protest, mandatory veiling has been a popular target."

In the 1930s, Iran's ruler, Reza Pahlavi, banned the hijab, or veil, as part of a modernization drive. But when a cleric-led uprising ousted Shah Reza's son in 1979, Iran's Islamic revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, announced an edict mandating the hijab. On March 8, 1979, in the midst of the revolution, tens of thousands of women marched against what was then a new law requiring modest dress.

Since then, all women have been required by law to wear a headscarf and long, loose clothing in public. They are also "subject to entrenched discrimination" in daily life, Amnesty International says, "including in access to divorce, employment, equal inheritance and political office." Iranian women, for instance, are banned from singing in public, cannot attend public sports events and need a husband's approval to get a passport or travel outside the country.

In recent years, however, women have pushed the boundaries of the hijab, allowing their headscarves to slip and reveal much of their hair, especially in cosmopolitan Tehran.

President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate who has championed change, has urged Iran's ruling clerics to relax the social restrictions.

In December, Tehran's police chief said his deputies would no longer arrest women for violating the Islamic dress code, and the government also recently rolled out a public relations campaign targeting the harassment of women on the street and the subway.

In February, Rouhani's office released a 2014 report on Iranian attitudes toward the hijab. According to the study, 49.8 percent of Iranians oppose government intervention to enforce the veil, which they consider to be a private matter.

But as more and more women have staged individual protests, Tehran's police chief, Gen. Hossein Rahimi, again took a hard line, saying late last month that his forces "will not tolerate this kind of behavior."

Since the first woman, 31-year-old Vida Movahed, was photographed publicly unveiling in late December, more than 35 women "have been violently attacked and arrested" for demonstrating against the veil, Amnesty says. Her protest coincided with the nationwide demonstrations over poor living conditions and repression.

One woman, Shaparak Shajarizadeh, is being held in solitary confinement on charges of "inciting corruption and prostitution," a crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison, Amnesty reported.

"This is a deeply retrograde move by the Iranian authorities," Magdalena Mughrabi, Amnesty's deputy director for the Middle East

and North Africa, said of the charges in a recent statement. ?It places many women at serious and immediate risk of unjust imprisonment, while sending a chilling message to others to keep quiet while their rights are being violated.?

Another woman, Narges Hosseini, was sentenced to more than two years in prison for her protest, according to her attorney, Nasrin Sotoudeh. A statement from Tehran's prosecutor general did not name Hosseini but said a woman had been sentenced for ?encouraging moral corruption.?

Iranian women ?don't put all their hope in a government that has never taken a single step? to improve their rights, Sotoudeh said. Sentences such as the one against Hosseini ?will only increase solidarity among women in the movement,? she said.

In addition to the protests, women have also launched social media campaigns to raise awareness of daily discrimination.

On the eve of International Women's Day, Iranian women started the #WeAreEqual hash-tag, sharing accounts of harassment, discrimination and violence.

?When I was in high school, a man tried to harass me in the street. I started shouting and two women approached me telling me to keep silent for the sake of my reputation,? Iranian journalist Nahid Molavi posted on Twitter. ?It took me a long time to learn I shouldn't keep silent,? she said. ?And that objection does not equal the loss of reputation.?

For Azadeh, the artist, the protests mark a ?turning point,? and she doesn't know how far they may spread.

?I feel optimistic about this moment,? she said. ?There are people like me who won't turn back.?

Source: Washington Post