

MAHSA AMINI AND THE ANTI-HIJAB PROTESTS IN IRAN: A POST-TRUTH ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The issue of Hijab has gained significant attention globally for the past few years. While in one corner the movements lay emphasis on Islamic identity and observation of Hijab, in many other parts of the world, Hijab is seen as repressive. Most of the anti-Hijab campaigns find support in Western capitals that has caused a reaction from the Muslim world. The criticism on Hijab is seen as Islamophobic. The states in which Hijab is a compulsion also include Iran. The protests inside Iran against Hijab have been a common feature since 2018. In 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini and the subsequent outcry has once again brought the issue of Hijab into limelight. Nonetheless, more than Hijab, the domestic agitation against the government entails various factors while the global coverage of anti-Hijab protests inside Iran depict a visible anti-Iranian rhetoric. This paper evaluates the role of media and the shaping of perception with regards to anti-Hijab protests inside Iran and attempts to decipher the factors that made Hijab a political symbol instead of being taken up as a social issue.

Keywords: Mahsa Amini, Anti-Hijab Protests, Post-Truth, Hybrid Warfare, Islamophobia, Iran

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Introduction

The 2022 anti-hijab movement in Iran started with the death of a 22 years old Iranian Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini. The alleged cause of the death, as reported by the Western media, was torture during the custody of the Iranian Moral Police for not wearing the modest hijab. On the other hand, Iran denied the claims of any torture during detention and adopted the line of a sudden heart attack as the leading cause of death.¹ Nonetheless, the family of Mahsa rebutted the Iranian state's stance by claiming that she was in the best of her health.² Protests that started in the home town of the girl on her funeral overtook the entire country and since then generated momentous coverage across the globe. Iran witnessed the mass protests in which women came on the streets with their heads uncovered, swaying their scarfs in the air and burning them in the fire as well, symbolizing their discontent with the current Islamic regime. The wide scale of the protests remained unprecedented since the Green Movement of 2009. According to international media, during the protests and the crackdown of the security forces, 402 people died along with 328 members of the security forces.³ While according to Iranian sources, 200 people and 328 security forces died during the protests. Moreover, Iranian media referred to the protests as riots.⁴ The Supreme Leader, on the occasion of the passing out parade of the police force cadets, blamed America and Israel for instigating the protests to weaken the Iranian regime. During his speech, he praised the role of security forces including the Basij Militia, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the police for their role in dealing with 'rioters'.⁵ The primary reason for blaming the West was the coverage provided by the media and the sympathies that it amassed in Western capitals, including the US and the EU. The event was led by people from all segments of society, especially women, to show their solidarity with Mahsa and her family. In this regard, women throughout the world cut their hair as an anti-regime gesture. While such incidents were not

new, the significance of those mass demonstrations lies in the media coverage that shaped the opinions of millions globally. The media was used as a weapon of fifth-generation warfare. Through the use of conventional and social media, very effective propaganda was spread against the Iranian regime. The Western media successfully created an environment and built a notion of regime change in Iran throughout the world. The news which had the reputation of a social issue became news with political objectives in no time.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that has been used in this paper is Post-Structuralism. It is a theory of post-positivist tradition, which emerged in France in the 1950s during a literary movement. Eminent scholars of this theory are Ronald Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. As the name suggests, the undertones of the theory are embedded in structuralism. Like structuralism, the niche post-structuralism takes is theorizing that belongs to philosophy, literary theory, and critical theory.⁶ The main tenets of post-structuralism are that reality is embedded in perceptions and is generated through discourse by commissioning several discursive techniques. There prevails no objective reality but a constructed one.

The role of hegemonic power, moreover, is very important in the construction of reality. This is because, among various discourses, the hegemonic discourse is readily accepted by different people throughout the world. This conditions the minds of people in the construction of reality. Post-structuralists are staunch believers in the fact that language has political and social undercurrents and functions. Language plays a pivotal role in the generation of political and social realities. In simple words, post-structuralists define reality as the intelligent deployment of language. The bedrock of reality is how intelligently it is framed through political rhetoric and propagated through the help of mass media, especially through the media of

hegemonic power.⁷ Due to the aforementioned tenets, post-structuralists give special attention to the role of media.

According to the scholars of post-structuralists, the role of media is embedded in discourse generation, securitization, and the construction of reality.⁸ Media disseminates political rhetoric and paves the way for public opinion in favour of the government's foreign policy endeavours. For example, during the Iraq war, there was resentment in the American public about fighting the war. Therefore, the American government deployed journalists with American troops stationed in Iraq. Since the media personnel were living with the troops and were stationed alongside them, the journalists saw the plight of soldiers fighting there. Along with that, the US government made them see the plight of people from an angle that legitimized the government's intervention in Iraq. The journalists reported the spectacle they saw in Iraq, hence reshaping public opinion in favour of the US government. This phenomenon is known as embedded journalism.⁹ The circle goes in the reverse direction as well, where the media acts as the mouth piece of the people for putting pressure on the government.¹⁰

The role of media in the case of Mahsa Amini has been very crucial in influencing narratives. From August to October, three women across the world died tragically. In Baghdad, while working in her fields, a girl named Zainab was shot dead by the bullet of American troops stationed near Baghdad airport. In Mississippi, on 22 August, Mable was shot dead by the local Biloxi Police in front of her children. Hardly a few people would have heard about these two deaths.¹¹ Since Mahsa belonged to Iran, which is an arch-rival of the US, the news to date is in the limelight. The Western media is portraying the subject as people's demand for regime change. The Western media was found reporting that Ibrahim Raisi, Iran's President, was chanted at 'Get Lost' by the protesters, especially the women

protesters, but instead, it was reported lately that the President was welcomed by the female students with their presence in hijab.¹²

Furthermore, on social media, nearly 52 million tweets have been posted in solidarity with Mahsa for regime change in Iran and against the hijab.¹³ Even a Persian Twitter handle run by the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs Tweeted in solidarity with Mahsa.¹⁴ The media has certainly altered the way people are thinking in the case of Mahsa Amini. People residing outside Iran certainly view the government as oppressive and Islamophobic sentiment has increased among them. The hijab is portrayed as a symbol of suffocation and oppression. The government of Iran, responsible for the application of shariah law in the country, is seen as the oppressor and the need for salvation from the regime is being inculcated into the minds of the people. The Western media has efficaciously constructed a narrative against the Iranian regime which in-turn has proved beneficial for the US government.

Therefore, this paper analyses all these trends using the tenets of post-structuralism and addresses the query related to the hijab Law in Iran and how the media plays a pivotal role in shaping and reshaping perceptions for political purposes.

Incorporation of Compulsory Hijab in the Iranian Law

Right after the revolution in 1979 as the theocratic forces managed to dominate the post-revolution political structure, Iran, to reproduce an ideal Islamic society, incorporated the compulsory hijab laws in the 1980s through a referendum.¹⁵ Educational institutes were especially kept in focus by the government to assimilate them with the culture. According to the hijab laws within Iran, anyone found violating religious obligations was to be subjected to 74 lashes initially. One striking feature of the law was its universality which required both men and women to dress modestly. Nonetheless, since the punishment criteria for violating the dress code was unclear in the

Sharia, Ayatollah Abdul Karim Mousavi Abedili gave the justification for its legalization which would allow the state to intervene as the flagbearer of Islamic values.¹⁶

The incorporation of hijab laws held a symbolic importance for the revolution that adopted the anti-Western rhetoric. At the time of pro-Western Reza Shah Pahlavi, the hijab was considered a matter of legislation. In 1935, in an incident famously known as Goharshad Mosque Rebellion, the monarchy forced women to remove the veil in public and men to follow Western-style dressing.¹⁷ In addition, heavy consumer taxes were levied on the public by the monarch. In response to these restrictions, the people, including merchants, women, and locals poured onto the streets and took refuge in the Goharshad shrine. For nearly four days, the security forces refused to violate the sanctity of the shrine but eventually, on the orders of the Shah, broke into the shrine and killed hundreds of people. Furthermore, during 1941- 79, there were no strict laws that would dictate women's attire in Iran. But many women opted to wear hijab and used to cover their heads.¹⁸ The women covered their heads at that time mainly because of two reasons: one was to show their discontent with the monarchic setup and the other was to observe the societal norm, i.e., the issue of 'honour'.

After the revolution, however, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the willingness to observe the hijab increased even more. In his speech in 1979, he declared hijab compulsory in the workplace for women. From 1985 onwards, wearing a hijab in public became obligatory, even for foreign female visitors.¹⁹ Over time, more and more social and legal restrictions were put in place as a part of the law. Criminal punishments, ranging from as low as fines to as strict as imprisonment, were announced for the offenders.²⁰ From 2000 to 2018, no significant legislation on the matter of hijab was passed. The only worth mentioning development was the formation of the morality policy or *Gasht-e-irshad* in 2005.

2018 saw a new facet opening for hijab laws. The government from 2018 onwards, no longer imprisoned or fined women for wearing the hijab properly rather Islamic educational classes were conducted for women, especially for those who were seen dressing ostentatiously in public. Tehran's police announced that women would be fined and taken to detention centres. According to Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran, the penalty for the abrogation of the hijab laws ranges from a \$20 fine, 10 days to up to a month in jail⁶ and *tazir*, known as the discretionary punishment. Any act depicting public indecency could lead to 10 years in jail.²¹

Formation of the Morality Police

The history of morality police supervising the dress code is controversial in Iran. At the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi, as the society was undergoing enforced modernization, the police were used for the first time to remove hijabs publicly.²² Similarly, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, no such institution or force was present to supervise and execute the adaptation of hijab laws in society. Therefore, these responsibilities were given to the 'volunteers' that resulted in the *Basijification* of the Iranian society and subsequently the police department.²³ The Basij militia was formed during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.²⁴ Volunteers were encouraged to be a part of the force during the war. The Basij militia had its presence in every Iranian university to manage the moral conduct, behaviour, and dress code of the students. However, it was during the tenure of the former hardliner president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that the morality police, also known as *Gasht-e-Irshad*, came into existence and the formal institutionalization to enforce hijab laws was carried out after its establishment.²⁵ Being a part of the Iranian National Police, it has access to arms, authority, and detention centres.²⁶ The operational requirements of the force are keeping an eye on the public to ensure proper and modest dressing explained in Iranian law. In the past, the police had made sure that men would wear green uniforms while the women would cover

themselves through *chadors*. It has both male and female members along with approximately 7,000 undercover agents.²⁷ These forces usually supervise crowded places like subway stations, shopping centres, and roads to prevent immodest dressing. Nonetheless, the interpretation of immodest dressing varies significantly, i.e., from wearing a loose hijab to body-fit dressing. Once a woman is found violating the laws or being explicit in the public, she is taken either to the police station or an Islamic educational and counselling centre where she is equipped with the knowledge and teachings of Islam, especially on the matters of hijab and modest clothing. Usually, the woman is released on the same day provided that any family member would bring her proper clothing.²⁸

Provided the strict implementation of hijab laws by the morality police, several controversies have emerged regarding the misuse of power. The government, with the help of the morality police, also tightened its grip on dress-code violations. Moreover, the government arrested the intellectuals who initiated a scholarly and cultural dialogue between Iran and the West. Among them was an eminent Iranian historian Haleh Esfandiari, who was detained while visiting her mother in Iran.²⁹ In August 2019, the Iranian government cracked down on the activists affiliated with the UN who were protesting against the prison sentence for women opposing the hijab laws. Some of these women were sentenced to 5 years of jail by the 28th Chamber of the Revolutionary Court and some were sentenced to 10 years on the charge of promoting prostitution and assisting moral corruption.³⁰ In the year 2022, the death of Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini was the biggest controversy that the morality police faced. The girl, as mentioned above, died in the custody of the morality police thus morality police was faced with the allegation of her murder.

Hijab Protests

Hijab protests inside Iran can be differentiated into two categories: the pro-hijab movement and the anti-hijab movement. During the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the unveiling rules were commissioned by the monarch, drawing its inspiration from Kemal Ataturk of Turkey. This decree issued by the monarch was known as *Kashif-e-Hijab*.³¹ During his visit to Turkey, the monarch expressed his delight over the Westernization in the country. The main motive behind this movement was to incur more Westernization in traditional Iranian society. Shah thought that the installation of Western ideals was the only thing that could pave Iran's road towards development. The unveiling movement, however, was met with resentment from the Iranian women because, rightly so, they were the ones effected the most by these laws. Among these protesters were also the clergy of the country. This was the time when the hijab was worn by women as a sign of opposition to the monarch's orders.

After the revolution, as the clergy managed to dominate the political system and had a wide array of supporters, the hijab was made compulsory. The striking feature was the support to clergy from the rural religious class of the society, the women of which used to observe hijab already without any compulsion. Nonetheless, the imposition by the state was considered outrageous. In 1979, on Women's Day, i.e., 8 March, thousands of women alongside men gathered in the streets of the country and showed their discontent about these laws. Their slogan was "in the dawn of freedom, there is an absence of freedom."³²

In 2009, during the presidential elections, Mir Hussain Mousavi derived overwhelming support from women belonging to the age group of 20-30. It reflected public support for his reformist stance and discontentment of the women with hijab laws. The women extended the Green Movement of Mousavi to the Muslim hijab. The women came on the streets with green attires, headbands, shawls, and

manteaux symbolizing their hope for change which they expected from Mousavi.³³

Later, in 2017, the White Wednesday movement was popularized as 'My Stealthy Freedom'.³⁴ This movement aimed to invite both men and women to dress up in white veils, bracelets, and scarves to record their protest against the mandatory hijab laws. This movement was also addressed to the women who were willing to wear hijab but were opposed to the idea of it being imposed on other women. Masih Alinejad, the pioneer of this movement, is an Iranian-born activist and journalist residing in the US. Later that year, another movement named 'Girls of Revolution Street' started. It was started by a girl named Vida Movahed. She stood on the top of a platform on Enghelab Street in Tehran without her hijab on. She raised her white veil which symbolized salvation from the compulsory hijab laws. The girl was later arrested by the police. The video of her went viral which fuelled similar protests in other parts of Iran as well. In the following months, at least 35 women were arrested under the charges of promoting prostitution and sinful acts.³⁵

The aforementioned movements were very short-lived and did not have much impact. However, the alleged death of Mahsa Amini under torture sparked unprecedented protests in Iran. This movement not only encompassed reservations against hijab laws but other shortcomings as well like that of economic turmoil, inflation, and unemployment. The impact of the movement was such that even voices of regime change echoed within Iran. This movement was unique in the sense that it was a leaderless movement. The protests that started at the funeral of Mahsa in her hometown further stoked the dissent in the other parts of Iran like a domino effect. Not only nationally but also internationally, people recorded their protests in their respective countries. Activists and journalists like Masih Alinejad and celebrities from the entertainment business like Angelina Jolie, Britney Spears, Nazanin Boniadi, and many more supported the

protests in Iran. The voice of Alinejad sparked more interest in the international media because of her history of standing up against the Iranian regime on hijab and the fact that she belonged to the Iranian diaspora.

Media: A Major Tool in Shaping and Reshaping Perceptions

The news of Masha's death was broken by two Iranian journalists named Nilofar Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi. Mohammadi who worked with the *Sharaq Daily* posted the picture of Mahsa's funeral through her Twitter handle. This turned out to be her last project before she and her fellow journalists were arrested by the Iranian police. After this Twitter post, the entire global media was inundated by the news.³⁶

Both Iranian and international media have different takes on the news. The international media, especially that of the West, promulgated the anti-regime rhetoric that completely reshaped the focus from being taken up as a social issue to a political one. The reports of the Western media had 'regime change' features. For example, headlines like *Iranian women fighting for freedom*,³⁷ *Mahsa Amini: Students in Iran chant 'get lost' at paramilitary visitor*,³⁸ *Iran's 'women's revolution' could be a Berlin Wall*,³⁹ *Iran protester: 'You know that you might never come back, Study: Majority of Iranians want regime change as country's protests continue to grow'*⁴⁰ and much more substantiated the aforementioned claim. Instances, where the protesters were found guilty of attacking the police, were not reported in the international media. Moreover, clips of protestors knocking off the turbans of religious clerics were completely unheard of in the mainstream Western media.⁴¹ Despite the casualties of both security forces and the protestors, Western media entirely ignored mention of the violence inflicted on the former. Instead, the miseries of protestors and their discontent were widely dominant in Western news coverage. For example, *'How Iran's protests transformed into a national uprising'*⁴²,

*'Iran's protest movement: The tipping point isn't far away'*⁴³, and *Iran protests: Alarm at crackdown by security forces in Kurdish city*⁴⁴ depicted the bias in the reporting of the Western media. News of 15,000 protesters being executed inside Iran was also falsely floated in the international media. Even Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was deluded by this false media reporting and Tweeted the fake news which upon realization was deleted by him. On the contrary, the pro-hijab movement in India did not get any significant mention in the international media as the anti-hijab movement. The pro-hijab movement in India was depicted as solely a social issue without having any political objectives but such was not the case in the Iranian anti-hijab movement. It was portrayed as an issue with political objectives. International media interpreted the symbolic acts of cutting hair and taking off the hijab as a protest against Islam, depicting their prejudice against Islam and Islamophobic mindset.⁴⁵ Radio Farda which is run by the US agency for global media also disseminated the same narrative. Alinejad, who is also a part of the Farda group, is amongst the most popular journalists being interviewed globally.

Iranian media on the other hand propagated the official narrative along with the opinion and demands of the protesters. The news of Mahsa's death was not as much of a frenzy in the Iranian media as it was in the Western media. Along with the anti-hijab protester, pro-hijab protests were also covered in the Iranian media. Incidents which included the government standing in sympathy with the Mahsa family were not mentioned in the international media but were covered by Iran's local media. For example, the post-mortem report was also published first in the local media. According to the autopsy report, the death was not caused by the blow to the head but rather because of multiple organ failures. The girl had gone through surgery for a brain tumour at the age of 8 years and due to this underlying disease of hers she was on multiple medications.⁴⁶ These underpinnings of the autopsy report were not heard of in the

international media as it advocated the stance of the morality police. The Supreme Leader and President Ibrahim Raisi, according to Iranian media, expressed their grief over the death of Mahsa. Furthermore, the Iranian media reported about the phone call the Iranian Prime Minister made to the family of Mahsa Amini and wished them patience and expressed his sympathy over the demise of their daughter.⁴⁷ This significant conversation, however, was not mentioned in the international media.

Analysis

Before the tenure of Mohammad Khatami, hijab laws were strictly implemented in the country. Since Khatami was a reformist, during his period from 1998 to 2005, the implementation of Islamic and hijab laws was relaxed.⁴⁸ This period saw the least protests from women against the hijab. Mohammad Khatami was then succeeded by a hardline Islamist President Mohammad Ahmadinejad. This is also the time of the formation of the morality police. The main reason for such institutionalization of Islamic laws by the hardliners was a reaction to the ultra-liberal policies of Khatami. The formation of the morality police was not, however, welcomed by the people especially the women and the youth. A report by Iran's parliament's research centre in 2018 showed that the popularity of hijab from the 1980s to 2018 had seen a staggering decline from 85 per cent to 35 per cent.⁴⁹ The economic turmoil fused with the incident of Mahsa led to the outbreak of protests on such a grand level. Most of the protests before the death of Mahsa encompassed the economic instability in Iran along with other domestic problems people were facing.⁵⁰ As the importance of youth in the Middle East rose after the event of the Arab spring, the hijab movement was also led by the youth in Iran. Youth wanted the government to give as much attention to their economic plight as much as it focuses on the implementation of the hijab laws.

Nonetheless, more than the ground reality, the role of media in depicting it can't be overlooked especially when the media is regarded

as one of the major tools of fifth-generation warfare. The same happened in the case of Mahsa Amini as the Western media, particularly the US media, was successful in prompting the issue towards the political cause of regime change rather than a social cause. Mahsa's incident is not the first time in which the media's role was influential. Media played a persuasive role after the cold war in foreign engagements of the US. The CNN effect was quite visible in this connection.⁵¹ The CNN effect influenced the government to respond to foreign policy issues which the media showed as real-time events which compelled the government to go for humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan amongst others by using the camera power.

Nearly half of Iran is composed of women. Contrary to what western media portrays, Iranian women make up more than 55 per cent share in university-going students and graduates.⁵² The literacy rate of women in Iran is 85.5 per cent.⁵³ The life expectancy of women in Iran from 1991 has increased from 63 years to 79.1 years in 2020.⁵⁴ Moreover, the employment rate of women back in 1990 was 10 per cent however in 2021 it was estimated as 14.35 per cent. As of 2020 18.9 per cent of women work in managerial positions inside Iran and 19.9 per cent work in senior managerial positions.⁵⁵ Among these employed women only 19 per cent are those who are religiously trained and employed as religious professionals.⁵⁶

Despite these facts, the answer to western media depiction lies in the tenets of post-truth. Post-truth says that perceptions prevail over reality. The objective facts in the given circumstances are less influential and effective in shaping public opinion as compared to perception, personal belief and emotions.⁵⁷ Post-truth suggests that in the common world, the factual truth loses its relevance in the public discourse. The same happened in the case of hijab protests. The facts mentioned above were not known to the common masses because the layman does not relate to the facts stated in the books or the

paper. The masses relate to what is shown in the media and what they listen to. That is why media is such a lethal and pivotal tool in fifth-generation warfare especially for engaging the masses. The international media very effectively created a narrative or regime change out of the social issue which was bought by the masses as well and Iran had to face the music of such propaganda.

Conclusion

The compulsory hijab laws in Iran have indeed generated a lot of controversies as well as a debate between the different social and political elements of the country. More than hijab, the conduct of morality police along with the incidents attached to its legacy has remained in the highlighting feature for over a decade. The hijab laws were incorporated nearly four decades ago and even if at that point it amassed the support of the masses, there is a pressing need to reanalyse the essentiality of such laws. However, it is also true through facts that hijab is not an obstructing factor for women in terms of pursuing their careers, education and status in society. On the contrary, women in Iran are empowered both in their personal and professional spheres as depicted by the aforementioned figures.

Nevertheless, when it comes to Iran, it is often seen that any event which would entail negative implications for Iranian external relations, regional role or internal dynamics, the reporting of it is highly exaggerated. It can be seen in the Western coverage of the 2017-18 protests which first erupted in the city of Mashhad—the stronghold of the clergy—against the economic policies of moderate president Hasan Rouhani. However, the Western media depicted it as an indigenous uprising against the Iranian Islamic system. Such negative reporting with an overt bias often leads to false analysis which eventually results in miscalculated Western policies towards Iran. In the era of hybrid warfare in which perceptions take lead over the reality, it is imperative to scrutinize the news. Relying only on any single faction of media outlets won't bring any objective findings.

Precisely due to such exaggerated hue and cry on women issues in Iran and depicting the anti-hijab campaign as an unfolding revolution initially, the western media later realized that such an objective is not achievable as the protests gradually died down. However, it is also necessary for the Iranian side to take concrete actions regarding the controversies around the morality police. A suitable solution would be to reassess the role of the morality police and transform it into some other force to ensure people's rights to liberty in the public.

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