

Interview

Iran: Inequality, Gender Apartheid & Revolt

Wednesday 18 January 2023, by [MATHER Yassamine](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2022).

Contents

- [Generations in Revolt](#)
- [Cracks in the System?](#)
- [What About Sanctions](#)
- [The Uncertain Future](#)

Introduction:

ON OCTOBER 16, 2022 Suzi Weissman interviewed Yassamine Mather on the demonstrations following Jina (Mahsa) Amini's murder for Jacobin Radio. Arrested by Iran's morality police for wearing a hijab too loosely, Amini was beaten to death and died in the hospital on September 16.

The protest movement quickly spread across the country and around the world as women took the lead, hurling their hijab and chopping off their hair. These demonstrations represent the biggest challenge the Islamic Republic has ever faced and are continuing and even growing larger. But in the first three months of demonstrations throughout Iran almost 500 people have been killed and there have been a number of short workers' strikes, including at the Shanahan steel plant.

Yassamine Mather is an Iranian scholar and chair of [Hands Off the People of Iran](#). She's associated with the Middle East Center at Oxford University, where she's also a scientific developer at Advanced Research Computing. She's the acting editor of Critique, a journal of Socialist Theory *and has written several articles on the protests in the* [Weekly Worker](#).

Suzi Weissman: *You've written a very strong statement that is available on the Hands Off the People of Iran website condemning the regime violence and analyzing the protest movement. Could you set the stage for us?*

Yassamine Mather: These protests came at a time when there was a lot of dissatisfaction in the country. The nuclear talks between Iran and various Western powers, Russia and China had come to a standstill. This has a direct effect on people's daily lives as the cost of living is very high.

People are aware of absolutely widespread corruption in the country. The gap between the rich and the poor is everywhere, but in Iran it's one of the highest, even in comparison with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Add to this of course 43, almost 44 years where women have been treated as second class citizens. Iran is different from the Taliban in Afghanistan in that the government hasn't stopped higher education, partly because of what it sees as its position in the global capitalist world, but also because of urbanization and the longer-term involvement of women in society prior to 1979.

Women were allowed education and higher education. But this didn't mean that gender apartheid, the form of second-class citizenship for women, was taken away. Women didn't find employment

after finishing the university. It was very difficult to maintain permanent posts.

They had contract jobs. So in a country where there is lack of employment security, women were at the bottom level. But also, the result of sanctions has made those in power richer and more powerful.

These people have used sanctions to create their own black market, creating a distribution system for basic food and goods at prices ordinary people find very difficult.

Here again, women are suffering more than men because it's the women who have to deal with feeding the family. Very few women are free of this task. In that sense Amini's death was the inevitable spark, one still growing every day.

I thought the protests would last two weeks, others thought it might last three weeks. We are now entering the fifth week and it's not dying but continuing.

Of course there have been similar protests, maybe even bigger ones in 2009. But what is different this time is their spread and the fact that it has gone beyond the normal circle. Everybody finds their way of joining the protest. If you're unemployed, you're joining to express your grievance.

If you are a worker like the workers in petrochemical industry or in the steel factory in Ahvaz, you join it because your salaries haven't been paid, your firm has been privatized, and all sorts of other reasons.

It's becoming a very unpredictable set of protests. An uprising, you could call it. I wouldn't call it a revolution, but uprisings.

Generations in Revolt

SW: *It's gone international, and I think that's really important. You see memes of women chopping off their locks in solidarity with women in Iran, especially in Europe where you're seeing massive demonstrations.*

But it's more than just women. Could you talk a little bit more about who is marching? Some say it's Gen Z, the younger generation that has grown up long past the time of any revolutionary fervor for the Islamic regime. Have social media allowed them to see what people their age all around the world are like? Is it just young people not wanting to be held back by the reactionary regime?

YM: We have to admit that the younger generation have been very prominent, the first on the streets, students in school, university students. But it's not just them.

This is a generation well aware of what is happening globally. Of course, you could say the same is true of the older generation — it's not like the 30-year-olds didn't know what is happening — but young people see it on their phones. So they are, if you like, more connected to what is going on globally.

A dictatorship normally has the wisdom to stay away from people's private lives. For example, the Shah's regime was a dictatorship, but it was very clear that the government didn't interfere in the private lives of people. In fact, it turned a complete blind eye to whatever people did; that's how a regime survives.

The Islamic Republic made a serious mistake, threatening its own survival. It is repressive, it's a neoliberal capitalist system. It exploits workers more than most other countries, it is corrupt — and

then it wants to interfere in what people wear, what they drink, where they go.

Can young men and women, or men and women in general mix, in a social gathering? It's not just the young who are upset about this. I think the 30-, 40- or even 50-year-olds find it an unnecessary interference in their daily life.

Although it's true that school students have been braver than older women, still you see women with hijabs walking with the protesters, saying, "I want to keep my headscarf, but I defend the right of others to not wear a hijab. That is fair enough.

And you hear all the women joining the protests saying, "I wish I had done something about this 20 years ago."

Cracks in the System?

SW: *There were protests in 2009. The 2019 protests were part of worldwide protests against austerity and neoliberalism. But every time it looks like that's going to be the end of the Islamic regime, and it never is.*

As you say, this regime does not try to concede even in a way that the shah did. They upped the ante against women and others who will not conform to the dictates of their law.

Is crackdown the only thing they know how to operate? Is it a way of saying: "The Islamic regime is not over and we refuse to bend?" Are there any divisions within the ruling groups?

YM: Very important questions. Remember that the Islamic Republic has many different forces for repression, and it hasn't used all of them. It has the Basij, which is supposedly a militia type force. It has the Revolutionary Guards — some people say the Revolutionary Guards haven't been fully deployed against the civilian population. It also has what is called the religious police; they are very prominent in these events.

It is becoming clear is that some within these forces are now beginning to doubt. I can't give you a percentage, but there is enough evidence to see that.

For example, there are a lot of stories about the Revolutionary Guards asking over the Internet, or over social media, "Is my pension secure if the regime changes?" This is the first time these people are actually concerned about the possibility that the provider won't survive.

There are examples of security forces being taken prisoner, beaten up and in a number of occasions, at least according to the government, killed by the protesters.

So we are seeing a very high level of tension in the country, and that has created divisions amongst the rulers. The "reformist" faction — this is a false name because I can't really consider someone who supports the Islamic Republic as reformist — the so-called reformist faction is saying, "Maybe we really shouldn't bother about the headscarf. That's not important. Let's go back to the nuclear talks and solve the economic situation."

Among religious people in Qom there are a couple of senior ayatollahs who have said there is nothing in the Koran about the hijab. It's a voluntary decision to wear. And so you can see there are divisions.

However, as you rightly point out, it really is difficult to get rid of this government. The Islamic regime has a lot of people who are paid directly to suppress others, and it will rely on them. Clearly some are in doubt now, but you can't say the problem is solved.

Clearly the government's attempt to say, "This is a U.S. plot" or "It's a Western plot" doesn't really work when people are in the street and see who is going on the demonstration, and even see the slogans at the protests, written on walls or banners hanging from bridges. That's why the security forces rush to clean up before the working day starts again.

A lot of women in the demonstrations say, "my father died for the Iran-Iraq war or "my brother was in the pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards)." I don't think they are lying.

It is difficult for the government to say this is just a plot or something. And I think the international support, especially when it comes from women going on the protest and cutting their hair, is helpful. But remember, this is not a government that worries about public opinion outside its borders. It's not a normal state.

What About Sanctions

SW: *What about the larger debate over the effectiveness of sanctions? This seems to be the only tool that the West uses — short of a military option, which is not really something that's they see as desirable. The only thing we see is the imposition of even more sanctions. This generally affects the population more than the leadership. You mentioned that sanctions have enriched the powerful. Could you talk more about that?*

YM: Sanctions on Iran are very long term. Some of them started in 1979, then more were added in 2000, 2007, 2014 — every decade has been more and more. So the regime has learned to live with them.

The regime has allies in Russia and North Korea. I know North Korea can't give much to anybody, but in terms of military or nuclear facilities it can help other countries.

Sanctions have been used by the government as an excuse. Every financial issue, whether non-payment of wages or the everyday rise in prices are blamed on sanctions. The reality is that it's not just sanctions, and at times it's not sanctions at all, that have created the economic problems of the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic follows every rule that the International Monetary Fund issues regarding privatizations. The last big protests in Iran were because the government ended subsidies for fuel. The IMF then praised the government for ending those subsidies.

However, placing blame on the sanctions is a very good tool for the government: "Oh, no, the economy is not our fault. It's because of sanctions."

The other tool the government has is the ability of using the foreign enemy to rally its own forces. That's very good for the regime and damaging to protesters. We should be wary of those dangers.

SW: *Could you tell us about the closer relationship between Iran and Russia, especially as Putin has become a pariah in the world now, even criticized by India and China. In one of your articles you hint at a growing level of collusion, not only with Russia but with Saudi Arabia. Is Putin in some way a role model and hero of dictatorships?*

YM: I think for some people in the developing world, in the emerging economies as I keep calling

them, Putin has become a bit of a role model. This also, of course, coincides with the U.S. decline.

People view it in two different ways. One is that it's beneficial for Iran to have this relationship with Putin. Additionally some people inside Iran remark that Putin invading Ukraine has encouraged regimes like Iran to be tougher, more dictatorial.

That's a very bad sign, especially for those forces on the left who have illusions about Russia and its role in the global economy and world politics. What are they talking about? Are they saying it's a good thing that dictatorships are emboldened by Putin's war?

Iran did provide Russia with drones. Again there are two positions — I'm not sure which one is true because I'm not a military person — some say the drones were completely useless and others are saying they were very useful.

There is also the factor of the new military commander, Sergey Surovikin, whom Putin has put in charge of the war in Ukraine. He has a background in Syria, which is his claim to fame. While there he collaborated with Iranian senior Revolutionary Guards who were on the same side. That's another nasty piece of collaboration.

The Uncertain Future

SW: *I can't ask you if you think that the regime will topple, but do you think that there's any possibility of a way out for the regime? Can they find a way to stop the protests and restore some form of order in Iran?*

YM: That's difficult to say because you have to remember that there isn't a clear leadership in the uprising. There are good reasons why there isn't, but it's a disadvantage when no one sees a potential alternative.

Of course, alternatives proposed by the United States or Saudi Arabia are in such ill repute that they wouldn't succeed without some kind of military intervention.

The left is weak and divided. It is confused globally, but inside Iran it's even more confused. So it's very difficult to see how some of the slogans that the left and the working class are bringing to the protests can take root under these circumstances.

The state is in a difficult position because they can't back down. They've said these protests are all the work of the United States and Israel. Since they've put their foot down, they can't retreat. The situation is, in a way, at an impasse.

Whether some factions within the regime will force it to make compromises is a possibility, and unfortunately, that would lengthen the regime's life. But the reformers are something of a spent force, especially irrelevant to the younger generation. It is very difficult to see that the spontaneous movement can develop within its own ranks a revolutionary alternative.

SW: *Yassamine Mather, I want to thank you for your insights and this overview.*

P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 222, January/February 2023:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc222/inequality-gender-apartheid-revolt/>