What Makes Democracy Work?
Learning from Iranians

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2022 Cunningham Lecture
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
29th November 2022

Introduction

Democracy is a political order that promises to protect basic rights, such as justice, equity, fairness and dignity. These rights are essential to the democratic process.

The right to protest is a basic moral right. It is an expression of a shared demand for change.

The aftermath of the funeral of Mahsa Amini which took place in Tehran on the 16 September 2022 raises some interesting issues for the study of democracies.

The death of this young Kurdish Iranian woman, allegedly at the hands of the Islamic Republic's 'morality police', initiated the current uprising.

An understanding of what happened in Iran before and during the revolutions of 1977-1980 can help in understanding what is happening in Iran now.

What connects pre-revolutionary Iran with what is happening today is women, and the rhetoric of the regime. The veil is a symbolic manifestation of the regime's rhetoric about women's bodies.

Women, women's bodies, and protests in Iran

Iran is a country where women take to the streets and protest. They protest not only against the constraints of daily life but also about colonial oppression and injustice.

One story of women in modern Iran could start with the protests of 1891-1892, when women led the revolt against the British Tobacco concessions granted by the Qajar dynasty.

Women were again active in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 – 1911 which was a struggle against the colonial influence of the Russians, the French and the British, and towards a modern Iran.

After this uprising, there was a flowering of radical and outspoken women's magazines, particularly in Tehran, advocating the emancipation of women. Most women were illiterate but the women who could read, read to the women who gathered in tea houses, or on street corners, to listen.

The modernisation project of Reza Shah's dynasty led to women's mandatory unveiling, on the 8th of January 1936. The edict was swiftly and forcefully implemented. It was opposed by conservative clerics.

Wearing the veil in pre-revolutionary Iran did not necessarily mean that the woman was conservative or a blind follower of the clerical establishment. Instead, it could signal other social meanings, such as religious nationalism or non-secular Marxism; being poor; being not well dressed for public spaces; or being modest.

Many women who were opposed to unveiling simply refused to leave their houses. Some feminists, although they supported unveiling, also strongly supported a woman's right to choose, and therefore also opposed the reform.

When I arrived in Iran in 1975, some older women wore the full-length, loose-fitting black cloth *chador*; headscarves were rare; most women wore a light coloured or white *chador,* often with flowers or leaves, or some other small pattern on them.

Young women were adept at using them to flirt with or tease men, re-adjusting their veil to reveal some part of the body or flashing their jeans at them as they walked past.

In 1977-1980, Iran had two revolutions: the revolution of 1977-79 which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, and the second revolution of 1979-1980 which saw the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the installation of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its Supreme Leader. The first might be called a populist uprising or revolution and

women played an important role, the second an Islamic revolution was led by and for men.

During the 1977-1979 revolution, the veil again became a political statement, a symbol of opposition to the Shah and to the Pahlavi regime.

Many previously unveiled women started wearing the veil for a range of reasons: some said that they had had a dream and in it the Prophet told them to wear it; some were protesting the treatment of women by men; some wore it in solidarity with conservative or poor women, who always wore it; some as nationalists protesting foreign interests and influence; and some wore it to lessen the likelihood of being harassed while protesting.

After the overthrow of the Shah, with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, when wearing the veil became mandatory, women took to the streets again. Their protests on March 8, 1979 resulted in a temporary retraction of mandatory veiling.

However, after Khomeini had seized absolute power, veiling was enforced on all women. Unveiled women were banned from their workplaces in 1980, and on the streets, unveiled women were attacked by members of the Revolutionary Committees.

The law was enforced first by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Committees, patrolling the streets or knocking on doors and searching; then later, by the Guidance Patrols, also called the Morality Police.

Since 1983, all women have been legally obliged to wear hijab in public, even non-Muslims and foreigners visiting Iran.

Certain forms of veiling, in particular wearing a black *chador*, are mandatory if a woman wants to go to the Mosque.

Wearing a head scarf which allows women to adjust how much hair is showing, or a knee length coat on which both the fit and length can be adjusted, are taken as signs of resistance to the regime. Women accused of “bad hijab”, as Mahsa Amini was, have typically been those adopting these latter forms of veiling.

The newly established Islamic government of 1980 also suspended the Family Protection Law. Overnight women lost the right to seek a divorce, child custody was denied to the mother, and the age of marriage for girls was reduced from eighteen to nine.

A husband could divorce his wife verbally or by mail. He could prohibit her from going out on the street or from working. Polygamy once again became legal.

All of these changes have one thing in common: an obsession with women's bodies, and a determination never to hear or to take heed of women's voices.

Resonances with the past

I lived in Iran before the first revolution. I was present at possibly the first manifestation of the revolution, and I was still there at its end, when the Shah and his family fled Iran and the monarchy was finally overthrown. So let me begin with some of my story.

I flew to Tehran on Boxing Day 1975 to work, initially, as an adviser to Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, the twin sister of the Shah of Iran. My job was to assist with the implementation of the resolutions and other decisions adopted at the 1975 Conference for International Women's Year.

Almost immediately, I was asked to go to Addis Ababa, where the first UN regional centre for women and development had been established.

My first task in my work with Princess Ashraf was to establish a regional research and training centre for women and development in the Asian and Pacific Region.

The few days that I spent in Addis Ababa, I was hosted by the Iranian Ambassador. Night after night, over dinner, by candlelight, he recited modern Iranian and classical Persian poetry, sometimes in Farsi, often in translation, never failing to give me the political context of a poem.

He described poetry as a space in which new life and new hopes could emerge. He strongly advised me, if I was going to work with women in Iran, to read the emancipatory and defiant poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, who lived from 1935 until her premature death in 1967.

Her voice, he said, reflects her feelings about the role of women in Iran. He recited for me the opening lines of her poem, Call to Arms:

Only you, O Iranian Woman, have remained
in bonds of wretchedness, misfortune and cruelty;
If you want these bonds broken,
grasp the skirt of obstinacy

Do not relent because of pleasing promises,
never submit to tyranny;
become a flood of anger, hate, and pain,
excise the heavy stone of cruelty. ...

For that person who is your creation,
to enjoy preference and superiority is shameful;
woman, take action because a world
awaits and is in tune with you.

It was my first introduction to Iranian cultural modernity. Iranians, I learnt, take poetry seriously. To many, it is the heart of Iranian culture.

After a few days, I packed my bag and flew back to Tehran. I was to live there on and off until the end of January 1979.

The terms of reference for my work were to work on national as well as regional and international matters relating to the welfare of women. In Iran, I worked with the Women's Organisation of Iran. It was what is sometimes called a family law and social welfare organisation: their focus was literacy, vocational training, childcare, family planning, and a range of family law issues.

Paradoxes and contrasts

Tehran is a city of extraordinary, unsettling beauty and sharp contrasts. The temperature goes from extremely hot and dry in summer, to winter's freezing cold wind from the snow. In summer, you can walk up the Elburz mountains behind Tehran, to sit, overlooking a pool, at a tea-house, drinking tea. In winter, you can ski down the same mountains.

The contrasts lie also between the north of Tehran and the south of Tehran. The north is a city of streets and walls that clambers up the foothills of the Elburz mountains. There is a lack of adornment. Once entered, through the gate in the wall, the extraordinary beauty of the enclosed gardens hidden behind the walls is revealed.

In the north live the elite, the traditionally wealthy and the newly rich; the old families and the new: senior politicians and civil servants, military officers, the court connected. In the mid 1970s, these made up 0.1% of the population of Iran.

Halfway down live, mainly in apartments, the middle classes, both the modern middle class, composed of white-collar employees and university educated professionals, about 10% of the population, and the traditional middle class which constituted 13% of the population and composed mainly of the bazaar shopkeepers, small manufacturers, small factory owners. It also included many of the clerical establishment because of family links and of historic links between mosques and bazaar.

A little way further down is the bazaar itself, a magic place, with caves of carpets or silverware or handicrafts, of spices and sheep's heads, of butchers and sweet makers. All of whom, when there is no revolution, will wish you a smiling "Salaam" and invite you to come inside and sip a glass of amber tea, while looking at his wares.

In the south are the slums and the tent cities of the homeless. It is choked by fumes from the oil fields and cars. The polluted air hangs heavily. There is no urban transport system. Here live the urban poor: the industrial and small factory workers, the construction workers, the street traders, the unemployed, and the newly arrived peasants, and other immigrants.

The south is a place where the crystal-clear melted snow from the north flows downhill through small street-side canals, or *jubes*, bringing the filth of the north down to become the cooking, cleaning and washing water of the poor.

These totally different worlds overlap at the edges. To me this became a metaphor for Iranian society, with its extremes of wealth and poverty, of intellectuals and illiterates, and of unlikely alliances among students and workers and the merchants from the bazaars, and the tribal chiefs, with the clerics.

The wealthy elite speak French when they are not speaking Farsi. They wear French designer clothes, men and women both, and perfumes and swishing silks.

Believers concerned about the body politic sought cures for it through faith and prayers; intellectuals through rational discourse; Islamic Marxists or nationalists or secular socialists sought cures through action.

Illiteracy and learning

I at first lived in an apartment half-way between the north and the south, on, as I recall, *Takht-e Jamshid*.

Next door, unshaven men were constructing the building next to mine. As they carried the mud bricks and the cement up into the building, they recited, from memory, the *Shahnameh*, the wonderful epic poem by Ferdowsi.

This feat is even more complex than reciting by heart Shakespeare or the Bible in our culture. The workers knew it by heart; they were illiterate peasants.

I began to realise that I was not just working in somebody else's culture, I was working in somebody else's language. I found it profoundly unsettling that I could not read anything, not even place names.

There was nothing written around me that I could read: street signs, the newspaper, the signs on shops; the road names; any label in a grocery store. I felt what it might be like to be illiterate. I could not read anything.

The question of literacy in countries like Iran is complicated. I was starting to learn some of the greetings in Farsi, but I could not get my bearings through reading signs. That to me was extraordinary. I have never experienced anything so deeply unsettling as that.

About 70% of the adult population in Iran were Illiterate in the mid-70s, 60% of children did not complete primary school, and only 30% of applicants found university places in the country.

Yet for the construction workers that could quote the *Shahnameh* by heart or the followers of Khomeini from all over Iran who regularly received letters from him in exile, not being able to read signs was their way of being.

Hamid Dabashi in *Iran: A People Interrupted* says that both of his parents, as well as most of his uncles and aunts, were illiterate. He and his two brothers were the first generation to learn to read and write: "but that does not mean that we were more literate, learned or cultivated than our parents."

He continues:

> My mother could not read or write a word. But she knew more lines *of Persian poetry… by heart and recited them appropriately and on the right occasion, with impeccable prosody and elocution, than all my high school teachers put together. She would help me and my younger brother with school assignments, such as writing a composition, with appropriate Qur'anic references, prophetic traditions, and Persian literary and poetic allusions.*
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> *When we say "illiterate" in an Iranian context, this is the sort of "illiteracy" we have in mind. (2007, 142-4).*

For these people, illiteracy is not necessarily a barrier to communication, to learning, or to being literate in a different sense, nor to being a lover of poetry.

An object of curiosity

In the Women's Organisation of Iran, I was an object of curiosity. It was a time when there was increasing suspicion of foreigners and a distrust of the number of foreigners that the Pahlavi regime was bringing into the country. I did not feel distrust in the office, but I did feel that I was an oddity.

In the streets, it was another matter. Iran's decades of struggle against the encroachment of foreign powers, concessions and influences has left in its wake widespread xenophobia, perhaps more evident in the poorer suburbs and around the bazaar. I was stoned, spat upon, harassed, whistled at, touched up, insulted. Catching a bus, even a (shared) taxi, was a daily humiliation; carrying home a frozen chicken in a string bag was a strategy of self-defence.

I was profoundly lonely. I did not know or meet anybody except Iranians.

My social life had to fit into the structures of Iranian society. If I were invited out at lunchtime by my women colleagues then I went where women went in that society at lunch time, which is out with their families or with their friendship networks.

Women in Iran had many freedoms unknown then to women in Australia. For example, they could open their own bank account; could own property in their own name; they had the right to vote; and could stand for elections.

Women's time was lunch time, and they could choose their companions at lunch time. In the evenings, they dined with their husband's family.

The social structures of the evening rituals had no place for a single woman, a woman that came without a man attached. Even though there were times when I was invited out at night, it was awkward for everybody to have a stranger, a non-Iranian and a single woman, in their midst.

Culture and religion

In Iran, culture and religion are inextricably intertwined. In 1975, almost 90 per cent of Iranians were Shi'ah Muslims, some 9 per cent were Sunnis, and the remaining 1 per cent were Armenian, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i.

Shi'ah symbols and sentiments were present, not just in the religious vocabulary and practices of believing Muslims, but throughout Iranian culture. Thus, if we were travelling to the countryside, before departing Tehran, the team would, one by one, walk under the Koran. They would insist that I, as a non-Muslim, participate. This was so that our trip "would bear fruit", not, at least verbalised, to praise Allah.

Understanding such rituals become important when we look at the form the first revolution took.

After crossing under the Koran, we would drive out to the villages. I quickly came to understand that, to a villager, the women in the Women's Organisation, and I, were no different, one from another.

They referred to us all as *firangi,* foreigners. The urban, elite Iranian women were as strange to a villager as I was.

In 1977, I was appointed as the founding Director of the ESCAP Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, which was to be located in Tehran. I was to work to improve the lives of women in thirty-six countries and territories of the Asian and Pacific regions.

The office space I was given was in a building in the south of Tehran, near the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, slightly north of the bazaar. Front row seats for viewing the revolution, as it turned out.

It was a time of flying eastwards out of Tehran, around the region, working hard to help the women of the region to empower themselves. Our regional training courses were held in Bangkok because of the cost, as well as the cultural problems, of bringing groups of women to Iran.

Overthrowing the Pahlavi dynasty

Meanwhile, however, unrest was building in Iran. In 1963, the Shah had launched the White Revolution, to further modernise Iran, and to establish it as a major geopolitical power in the Middle East.

The White Revolution was to fundamentally alter Iran: aligning the merchant *bazaaris* with the clerics; creating a massive urban drift of poor and illiterate villagers; and tearing apart the clerical establishment.

The traditional power and wealth of the clergy was stripped away by land reforms and redistribution, and the strong influence of the clergy in the countryside was undermined.

Traditionally, the clergy did not publicly protest but, in 1963, one man openly opposed the White Revolution and the Shah himself, Ruhollah Khomeini. He actively spoke out against the new reforms, against granting suffrage to women, against the secular local election bill, against allowing Iran's non-Muslim minority to be elected or appointed to local offices, and against land reform.

Soon after, Khomeini was sent into exile. He continued to criticise the Shah and the reforms. He had by then split the clerical establishment over the issue of clerical political activism.

By 1977, the economy had suffered a downturn as oil revenues shrank. A number of dissatisfied groups had emerged. Alongside former landowners and clerics, there were nationalists and Marxists, both secular and Islamist, and a fast-expanding group of urban poor.

As the economy slowed down, construction and other industries also slowed; the men chanting the *Shahnameh* found themselves without work. Finally, there was increased suspicion and distrust of foreigners.

The Centre and its staff

When I established the Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, in Tehran, the first person I recruited was Mr Javaheiri. He was the Tea-man. This, I was told, was first person you hire in an office in Iran. Tea comes around constantly, golden amber, steaming hot, in tiny curved cups, with blobs of candied sugar, one of which you place in your mouth and drink the tea over it. It is an essential office amenity.

Mr Javaheiri was in his early thirties and lived in one of the slums in the south. He was a mere wisp of a man, with the sweetest smile. He had recently migrated from the country and, like most people in rural areas, was illiterate.

He badly wanted to marry and have a family. But he had no savings and could not afford somewhere to live. He could not get treated in a hospital because the staff demanded bribes before giving care. Families from the slums could not enrol their children in school because teachers and principals demanded bribes. At that time many of the slums were being razed to the ground for redevelopment.

Mr Javaheiri suggested that we hire his cousin, Mr Bayat, as our driver. Mr Bayat, it was to turn out, was a follower of Khomeini and regularly received cassette tapes from Iraq.

Life was falling apart for all sorts of people in Iran around that time.

Muharram and martyrs

Then came the end of 1977, when, according to the Islamic calendar, Muharram was to be celebrated that year. Muharram is the second holiest month of the Islamic calendar.

It is an especially important time for Shi'ites. From the first day of Muharram, to Ashura, the tenth day, Shi'ites mourn the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad.

It is a time when the men walk together through the streets whipping themselves. They gather with swords, chains and whips, cat o' nine tails with shards of glass on the ends. As they walk, they beat and whip themselves into a collective frenzy. If they split their head open with the sword, or die by any other means, they become martyrs.

There is a capacity in Iran for collective emotional states, particularly collective frenzy, that I had never come across before.

This Muharram, at the end of 1977, Mr Bayat was driving me home when we were caught in the middle of a Muharram march in the north of Tehran. The men by then were wild, in a state of collective frenzy. There was blood everywhere.

I stood out in that crowd, and there was an unarticulated thought that swept through marchers and onlookers alike that here was a chance for martyrdom. If they killed me, they would become martyrs.

It was terrifying to be caught in the middle of a procession of agitated men, whipping themselves into a frenzy with cat o' nine tails, thinking of martyrdom. I was so traumatised, I cannot remember how I reached home.

Martyrs in Iran are greatly revered. Traditionally, a martyr was someone who symbolised the struggle between the forces of good against evil, of believers against infidels. A person becomes a martyr through his willingness to suffer and ultimately die for his beliefs. This traditional concept of the martyr was in transition at that time.

By mid-1977, the concept of martyrdom had been expanded to include the murder of infidels. One could become a martyr by killing three infidels, three foreigners, according to one of Khomeini's cassettes.

Lifting and donning the veil

The end of Muharram coincided that year with the days of celebration of the lifting of the veil and that of land reforms, respectively, the 7th and 9th of January 1978.

Damavand College for Women, high in the foothills of the Elburz Mountains, had decided to celebrate the anniversary of the lifting of the veil with a speech night.

The Minister of State for Women's Affairs and the senior staff of the Women's Organisation of Iran were to be there. I had been asked to give the Keynote speech.

I arrived, speech in hand. The hall was full of impatient and noisy young women. But the stage was bare. It took me a while to find my colleagues and when I did, they were in a huddle, tense and fearful, silent, distressed.

Finally, someone explained: "The mullahs wanted to ban us from going ahead with this celebration. They said that if we do go ahead, we must wear veils, otherwise we will all be killed."

It was inconceivable. They were the most senior political women in Iran. To don the veil to celebrate the lifting of the veil was for them unimaginable. They could not work their way around it.

But their fear of the clergy and their vengeance was so great that eventually they produced a chador for me. We put our chadors on, celebrating the lifting of the veil by giving our speeches fully veiled. And they were terrified.

This invites a comment on freedom of speech. Democracy requires a true freedom of expression: we were, in one sense, free to give our speeches, but only under conditions that made a parody of this freedom.

Although unrecorded, for me, that day was perhaps the first day of the revolution. A show of force had been won by the clergy over issues of central importance to them: women's bodies and the place of women in society.

Rituals and revolutions

Two days later was the celebration of the land reform which had stripped the clergy of much of its wealth and power. In Qom, one of the great religious centres of Shi'a Islam, the seminarians staged a sit-in, to protest the changes introduced by the monarchy.

After the speeches, they marched through the streets. They came under a brutal attack by the Army and many people were killed.

This is when the ritual form of the revolution started. In Shi'a Islam, there is a cycle of mourning that starts on the 3rd day after a person's burial and continues on the 7th day. Then, on the 40th day, there is a day of overwhelming grief and mass mourning.

Three days after the 9th of January, there were demonstrations of ritual grief and mourning in Qom and in other cities, and again on the 7th day. The 40th day after the 9 January was 18 February. The clergy urged the people to take to the streets and protest. The people did.

They were detained and killed, again, in showdowns with the Army. The cycle of protest started all over again. This time the site of most of the deaths was Tabriz but the pattern of mourning was spreading all over Iran.

The people's acceptance of the ritual cycle of mourning was such that you could predict when the uprisings would happen. From 18 February we knew that the next large uprising would be on the 30th of March: there were protests on the street in 55 cities that day.

The organisation of the ritual cycles of mourning and protest was done from the Friday mosques in each city. From the 30th of March we waited in trepidation until the 8th of May, and again there were disturbances and unrest right across the country.

The protests diversified. Workers began striking. There were increasing strikes throughout all forms of industry across Iran. The *bazaaris* closed their stalls and shops in the bazaars and took to the streets. The students had been there from the start.

The ritualised form of the revolution had moved to the Friday mosque. The sermons became more and more high pitched, whipping the people into a frenzy of collective anger and outrage. You knew, every Friday, that anything could happen.

On trial

Meanwhile I now lived in the north of Tehran but still worked in the south. Each day, from our office, we watched the *bazaaris* burst out of the bazaar, stream past our office, up towards the north, to burn and pillage.

Behind where I lived, in the dirt alleys and twisted byways, lived a group of people who, it turned out, were Khomeini disciples. One Friday midday, a group of men knocked on the back door and told me, in Farsi, that I was to put on my chador and come out into the back lane.

I felt fearful but I had no option. I found a chador, fortunately, and went into the street. A large and menacing group of men and women were squeezed into the lane, waiting.

I was to be put on trial in a kangaroo court, in Farsi. The men were raising their fists, and yelling.

I was accused of being a whore: I shared the house with a woman; we lived alone; and men came into our house.

I was accused of transgressing Islam because we had alcohol.

I was accused of violating the Islamic dress code, of dressing immodesty. In fact, I always dressed according to the Koranic prescripts on dress. I dressed modestly, but I didn't wear the veil. There is only one reference to the veil in the Koran.

I was accused, violently, of anti-Islamic activities because we had parties on Fridays.

Which we did, great ones: with cassettes of Robyn Morgan singing 'The Menstruation Blues'. Luckily, they did not know that I had a freezer full of wild boar.

The men had formed a circle around me; the women stood as far back as they could get. The accusations went on for about four hours, all in Farsi. I repeated the accusations to make sure that I understood them. I was very frightened.

In the end, they said to me: "Either you convert to Islam before Muharram or you leave the country. If you do not, we will kill you."

From that day on, my neighbours were watching everything I did, waiting to kill me.

A martyr and the office

The office was staffed almost entirely by women, mainly foreigners, and we were aware that if Mr Bayat, the driver, were to kill three of us, he could be a martyr, for Khomeini and for Islam.

So each morning when Mr Bayat picked me up to take me from my home to the office, from the north down to the south of Tehran, I had to negotiate the safety of my staff, without directly mentioning that that was what I was doing, in Farsi.

It could not be discussed directly, because that could affect our safety. Rather a relationship had to be established, and trust built, each day, between home and office, which would provide protection for my staff. This, in a language I barely understood and certainly did not have any subtlety or nuances in. I never knew whether I had succeeded or not.

By now the revolution took to the streets every day. Normally the rioters would leave the bazaar, just south of us, about ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, and stream past our office.

They would shout slogans like "Death to the Shah" as they stoned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Women's Organisation of Iran. They would then move north to plunder the banks and buildings, pull out the furniture and files, set them alight in the streets. Tehran become a maze of bonfires and barricades.

In the evening, the car would be filled with as many women as possible, in their chadors, and Mr Bayat would try to thread his way through these bonfires.

The first revolution succeeds

My attention span, when I was finally in bed, was shortening: from Plato, to detective novels, then to essays, then to short poetry. I would lie in bed at night and every time the curtain moved, I would think that my time was up.

Out on the balcony, I would look down towards the south. Smoke from the bonfires hung in the air. In the distance, flares from the oilfields lit the night, huge flames burning into the sky.

From below, a celestial chant rose up; the massed protesters chanted "Allah u Akbar" – God is greatest. The chants rose up through the city, over the mountains, to the heavens. They floated past me each evening, sounds of immense beauty and immense terror, if you were a non-believer and a woman.

As Muharram was approaching in 1978, I had not converted to Islam and nor had the UN allowed me to relocate the Centre to Bangkok.

I decided to accept an invitation from UNDP Kenya to evaluate the Kenyan Women's Bureau. Despite significant difficulties – petrol was almost impossible to find, Tehran was burning, a curfew had been imposed, everyone was on strike, including the air traffic controllers – I flew out of a burning Tehran and spent Muharram in Kenya.

I returned to Tehran in mid December 1978. Tehran was roiling. A huge demonstation of about two million men had taken place at the Shahyad Square just hours earlier. The streets were full of men calling for the return of Khomeini, the end of the monarchy, and social justice for the "deprived masses". It was a *de facto* referendum on the monarchy.

The Shah left on 16 January 1979. The first revolution was effectively ended. And I was still there. I finally found a seat on a plane and left on the 30th of January 1979.

The revolution of 1977-79 that overthrew the Shah was not initially an Islamic revolution. It was a revolution of a people united against the corruption, oppression, and tyranny of a regime. It could have ended in a number of ways.

But it ended in the theocratic, authoritarian, oppressive and patriarchal rule of the clerics.

Creating the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran

Shi'a Islam was born in the seventh century as a religion of protest when the first and the third Shi'a imams said "No" to corrupt power. Since then, protesting power and leading revolutionary outbursts against the status quo has been second nature to Shi'ism.

Khomeini returned from exile on 1 February 1979 to a fractured but frenzied Iran. The people had succeeded in overthrowing the Shah!

But little thought had been given to the question of what comes next.

Iran was in the midst of a profound identity crisis. No longer were the poets, writers and other artists considered to be a sign of cultured modernity, no longer were they the public intellectuals seeking to guide wisely the body politic.

Cosmopolitan Iran was coming to an end. The poems of Forough Farrokhzad were banned and her publisher was ordered to stop printing her books. He refused and was jailed. His factory was burnt to the ground.

The urban poor, the *bazaaris*, and the disenfranchised peasantry, all men, who were in a state of revolutionary frenzy at the overthrow of the Shah, were seized upon by Khomeini. It was their aspirations and dreams which were to become the new political culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Khomeini was well aware that Shi'a Islam had always survived by being in a combative mode. He and his supporters set to work.

The first struggle was about the wording of the referendum put to a still frenzied population on the 30th and 31st March, 1979. The leftist wanted the words "Democratic" or "People's" in the title; the secular nationalist wanted just "Republic". The religious leftists wanted "Democratic Islamic Republic of Iran".

Khomeini was inflexible: "What the nation wants is an Islamic Republic, not one word more and not one word less." Khomeini's wording of the referendum was: Should the monarchy be replaced with an Islamic Republic: Yes or No? Unsurprisingly no-one said No. Khomeini called the first of April, 1979, the first day of the "Government of God".

The first draft of the new Constitution was prepared by the religious left. It was then worked on by an Assembly made up mainly by disciples of Khomeini, building on his sermons, but more importantly, using a radical concept developed and published by Khomeini in the late sixties, known as *Vilayat-e Faqih* or Guardianship by the Supreme Leader.

This concept of guardianship is a system of political governance based on rule by Islamic jurists enforcing Islamic Law.

Khomeini had described his government as "not based on the approval of laws in accordance with the opinion of the majority". That is, something other than a democracy.

However, the Islamic Republic of Iran, as outlined in the Constitution which was adopted by referendum in December 1979, is a republic with formal elections. There is an elected President, who nominates his Cabinet, and an elected Parliament.

However, candidates for all elected positions must be cleared by unelected clerical bodies.

Khomeini's writings mention none of this since "no one has the right to legislate except the Divine Legislator".

According to the Constitution, the Guardian Council oversees and approves all electoral candidates for elections. The Guardian Council also approves the Assembly of Experts candidates, who in turn elect the Supreme Leader.

The most powerful position of all went to Khomeini himself who became the first *faqih* or Supreme Leader of Iran.

The complexity of the system with its flows of power and control is savage. Khomeini's insistence that it is a "Government of God" reflects a seeming belief that the Supreme Leader <u>is</u> God, which entails that any transgression against the Supreme Leader is a sin against God.

Just months after the Constitution was approved, Iraq invaded Iran and Iranians began to look for a strong national leader. Khomeini's office came to dominate the political system.

Khomeini ruled as Supreme Leader until his death in 1989. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became the next Supreme Leader, an office he still, but just, holds.

Children of the Revolution: born into Resistance

Iranian women have brought their fight to the streets many times since the 1979 revolutions. However, there is something remarkable about what is happening today. The protests have evolved into the most significant challenge to the Islamic Republic since its establishment.

The leadership of the protesters is held by the children of their parents' and grandparents' revolution.

Most protesters were born 20 years after the 1979 revolutions. They went to school in Iran. They went to university there. They have been indoctrinated by the regime all their lives. As long as they have been alive, they have seen people speaking out against and resisting the regime.

The average age of the protesters is 15. They are technologically savvy. In the first month of protesting, the hashtag #mahsaamini was tweeted and retweeted more than 250 million times in Farsi. Schoolgirls boldly videotape themselves speaking out against the regime. Women video themselves, dancing in the streets or twirling their burning veils in the air.

Young boys knock the turbans of the mullahs off their heads and run away. School girls remove their compulsory *hijab* and chant "Death to the dictator" while they stomp on pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei, taken down from the walls of their classrooms. They refuse to chant the songs in praise of the regime, as ordered by the Supreme Leader.

The song of the protesters rings out all over Iran, and all over the world. "Baraye …" which means "For the sake of …" was written by one of them, Shervin Hajipour.

It is composed from the tweets of the demonstrators: "For the sake of dancing in the streets"; "For the sake of changing rusted minds"; "For the shame of poverty"; "For the regret of living an ordinary life"; "For the stray dogs that are brutally shot in the streets", "For the unstoppable tears"; "For the collapse of fake buildings; "For the girl who wished to be a boy"; and many, many more. Each tweet identifies a source of frustration and grievance or a site of resistance.

The young protesters make up just under 10 per cent of the population. Their mothers and grandmothers stand with them or behind them or keep lookout for them. They are determined to make their voices heard.

Young people are resisting and organising. Pardis Mahdavi talks of parties in Tehran about a decade ago at which, in the midst of the sex, drugs, and rock and roll of parties, were spaces for organising. At every party that she attended, there would be people sitting in circles discussing the political situation, and how they might come together to push back against the regime.

And they are supported by their parents, who are also frustrated by the regime, and feel like they have failed their children by letting the regime take power and as a result their children must lead lives of restriction and humiliation.

The protesters no longer want to be humiliated. They no longer want to daily resist the regime's notion of "proper dress". Women's place, to the regime, is hidden away

out of the sight of men. They no longer want control of their bodies to be in the hands of ageing clerics, many of whom they do not trust.

The protesters are educated, smart, and know how the rest of the world lives. The mandatory dress code for men as well as women and the constant meddling of Islamic law in their everyday lives have been a target of much of the outrage.

Protests had spread by mid November 2022 to over 140 cities and towns and over 16,000 have been detained or arrested. The death toll is over 350.

Chants of "Women. Life. Freedom.", "Death to the Dictator", "Ayatollah Khamenei must be toppled" and "President Raisi must be removed" ring out across the country. These chants have not been heard in protests before.

The chief of the judiciary declared that 'rioters' could be charged with 'enmity against God', 'corruption on earth' or 'armed rebellion' – all charges that carry the death penalty in Iran's Sharia-based legal system.

Already a Revolutionary Court in Tehran has found a defendant, who had set fire to a government facility, guilty of 'enmity against God". Once found guilty, there is no appeal court and the penalty for this charge is death. At least 20 people are currently facing charges punishable by death.

These young women are not afraid of dying. That a young woman goes out on the streets to protest, knowing that she might be shot, is remarkable.

To take to the streets, knowing that you might be raped, or beaten unconscious, or sentenced to death is almost beyond our understanding.

Protesters are demanding an end to a regime that has been designed to humiliate, subjugate, and disappear women's bodies.

Democracy: Lessons from Iranians

What we are seeing on the streets of Iran today, as far as one can tell at a distance, is the embodiment of feminist principles of organising: new forms of leadership in which there are no stars, no leaders as such, but a multiplicity of leaders; where the voice is a collective voice, a chorus of voices demanding social and political transformation.

This horizontal and collective way of organising is a feminist way of being in the world. It is reminiscent of the principles of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s in Australia.

The protest movement has a continuity of history. Feminism is, and has been for over one hundred years, alive and well in Iran. Feminists have taken to the streets to protest for as long as one has had a narrative of modern Iran. It is just that the narrators are usually blind to their presence.

In fact, feminism is thriving. There is a politics of solidarity that is creating resilient and robust spaces of discussion and dissent. As indeed there always has been.

There is *sustained* resistance, more than forty years of sustained resistance, from women, veiled or unveiled, along with the men who support them, to the patriarchy, be it monarchic or clerical or heterosexual.

There is sustained and continued resistance to the backlashes and punishments of the patriarchy. The protests are growing despite the violent crackdowns, the possibility of a death sentence or of being shot. Women are seeking larger visions of freedom and justice.

It is as if the protests embody a politics of conscious inclusion. The uprising started in Kurdestan but almost immediately spread across all regions of Iran. It comprises Sunni as well as Shi'a, and Kurds, Azaris, Armenians, Mazandaranis and other ethnic groups.

The protests are inter-generational and feminist, composed of women from all classes; tribal and rural women; wives of the elite and middle classes. The longer they last the greater the inter-generational presence of women. They are refusing the hegemony of ageing clerics in shaping national identity.

The protesters have the care of others at the centre of their concern and as an organisational principle, especially in the spaces of protest. Care plays a central role in building sustainable solidarity.

The uprising is an expression of a collective will. It is the creation of spaces of dissent and of grievance, spaces in which people come together to connect with each other, led, in this case, not by leaders, but by an overwhelming desire for change.

Finally, it is drawing attention to the fact that a nation cannot be built on the disappearance of women's bodies and voices.

It remains to be seen if all this is sufficient to turn a theocratic, authoritarian, oppressive, patriarchal, regime into some sort of democracy.

But one can say with certitude that it will, some time soon.

Thank you.

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