

Opinion – Narges Mohammadi's Nobel Peace Prize and Iran's Historic Clash

Written by Soheil Ashrafi

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SOHEIL ASHRAFI, OCT 6 2023

The winner of 2023's Nobel Peace Prize is Narges Mohammadi from Iran. Perhaps this isn't too surprising for those who follow the news of the women's rights movement in Iran, local in its geographic scope yet global in influence. A movement that is very much alive and creative under the influence of figureheads like Narges. The prize captures the efforts and sacrifices of the generations of women for freedom and human rights whom Narges symbolises and represents in her relentless campaigns outside and inside of prison.

The Nobel Peace Prize's bestowal unfolds in the light of the first anniversary of the movement of "Woman, Life, Freedom" commemorated in Iran and around the world. The movement also referred to by many as the Mahsa Revolution was stimulated by the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian-Kurd, in police custody in Tehran. Mahsa was arrested by morality police outside a subway station in Tehran under the pretext of what is described by officials as wearing a "loose hijab" – and thereby not fully complying with the rules. Triggered by Mahsa's tragic death, Iranians from every walk of life entered upon a fateful confrontation with the Islamic Regime over their lifestyle and freedom.

Contrary to being commonly characterised as a religious norm, the mandatory hijab is an entirely political apparatus, serving as a symbol of an Islamic "absolute society" that is to be reigned by the Velayat-e-Faqih (a Shia Islamist system of governance). Totalitarian systems, be they secular or theocratic, have no choice but to reinvent society. This is a lifetime project for them to which they spare no effort to resolutely commit themselves. This is an exercise of sheer power for ideological agendas, but above all, and often overlooked, for justification of their rule. Legitimacy and public acceptance must be manufactured where the state ideology and society part ways.

In order for an outsider to better understand the political history of the mandatory hijab and the struggle for freedom in Iran currently defined by women's freedom-seeking acts in defiance of the mandatory hijab, a closer look at the evolution of the 1979 Islamic Revolution over the years can offer important insights.

Besides the rule of law, legitimacy as a democratic foundation of power entered political discourse in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution in 1905. Ever since, despite all political upheavals and transitions and conflicting views and agendas by political parties and groups, legitimacy has been construed as the fundamental basis of rule in the country. In the background of legitimacy as the reflection of the will of the majority in power, the overthrow of the Shah took place in 1979. In a chaotic turn of events, the victorious Revolution spearheaded by Ruhollah Khomeini with the support of Islamist hard-liners and opportunistic allies of various political persuasions assumed a transformation in identity that caught many off guard.

Following the Revolution, a power vacuum was plugged by a fierce anti-Western Islamic sentiment – which had its roots in literature and public discourses as far back as the US-UK sponsored coup in 1953. The ideology of Islam as a political regime seeded the formation of an 'Islamic Republic' and Khomeini was soon designated as the 'Imam', the 'Supreme Leader' of the Revolution. After the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the rise of Ali Khamenei to power as his successor, the Revolution underwent yet another major transformation.

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From the perspective of the constitution and the doctrine of the Velayat-e-Faqih, the new Supreme Leader was evidently short of legitimacy even though the concept was long since made devoid of its true meaning. The lack of legitimacy was admitted by Khamenei himself in a speech at the Assembly of Experts to the effect that his appointment would not be respected and accepted by the political clergy and elite due to his lesser clerical rank and title. To redeem himself, however, Khamenei devoted resolute efforts to devise and implement a strategy which was to be dawn on observers only much later. He gradually yet uncompromisingly reduced Khomeini's politicised Islam to the Supreme Leader's cult and rule. This was pursued in tandem with radicalising and expanding the Revolution's ideology and values through the notion of the "Absolute Velayat-e-Faqih" for which an absolute society of faith and martyrdom must also have been manufactured.

Khamenei's lack of legitimacy would entail profound consequences for him and Iran. He was intent on building a parallel, absolute, society where his rule would stand above doubts, appearing unquestionably legitimate and total for the people. The doubtful, unfaithful, treacherous society must be portrayed as vermin and subjected to brutal prosecution and eradication, while the absolute society is to be promoted and orchestrated to advance the agenda of the "Absolute Velayat-e-Faqih". While the society of dissidence must be wiped off, the clannish absolute society is to be elevated to the status of the real people of Iran, the "real multitude".

In the new political climate, in the fashion of a messianic and cultish leader, the Supreme Leader thus would embody a divine figure who carries the wisdom and onus to safeguard the state from the decadence and sordidness of the Western lifestyle. For him the state is a concept to be reframed for mobilising the public to materialise the theology of martyrdom and liberation. As equally important as the military and intelligence powers of the regime is a symbolic apparatus to propagate and perpetuate the Supreme Leader's position and the anti-Western edifice at core he stands for.

The symbolic apparatus articulates the Islamic lifestyle in which the hijab takes centre stage. Every woman carries the mark of an austere patriarchal life based on which the Supreme Leader ultimately holds his title and position (and by extension the entire Regime). Khamenei is legitimised as a clerical leader only in an Islamic society where women are instrumentalised to continuously bestow legitimacy on his rule. Mandatory hijabs function beyond an Islamic norm or restriction, rather serving as a ubiquitous manifestation of an Islamic lifestyle, of the absolute society.

Mandatory hijabs will never be forsaken under Khamenei's rule. It continuously affirms to the hardliners, and to the outside world, that Iran is an Islamic state and therefore headed by a religious Supreme Leader – namely, Ali Khamenei. The legitimacy of Khamenei hinges on the perpetuation of the mandatory hijab. In a society where women enjoy civic freedoms including freedom of dress a religious leader would be an anachronism. The fall of the hijab will thus be fatal, and concurrent, to the fall of the ayatollah.

The Woman, Life, Freedom revolution in Iran marks a crescendo of ongoing conflicts between "free" and "absolute" societies – between Islamic and liberal lifestyles – that has been smouldering for decades. In the wake of 1979's Revolution, Islamic lifestyle came to the fore and was later aggressively and indiscriminately forced upon the entire society. Yet, simultaneously, over the decades a growing awareness of human rights and culture of defiance and resistance have shifted the balance in favour of liberal, progressive leanings.

Women appearing without headscarves in public are more than irate protests, they embody a collective agency abrogating the absolute power and rule of the Supreme Leader and an Islamic state. "Woman, Life, Freedom" is all that the Supreme Leader is not, exhibiting a profound chasm between two mutually exclusive discourses, one can exist only by vanquishing the other. It is only a matter of time before the rising tide of the liberal vision and hope for new life will wash the Islamic order away in Iran.

About the author:

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