



## Iran's Year of Defiance and Repression: How One Woman's Death Sparked a Nationwide Uprising

A year ago, Mahsa Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, died in the custody of the morality police after being arrested over alleged “improper” hijab in Tehran. Her death ignited a wave of national protests that further challenged the Islamic Republic’s autocratic rule and exposed its human rights violations, including systematic violation of women’s rights. Her death inspired a powerful slogan, that originated in the Kurdish women’s movement and soon echoed across Iran and the world: “Woman, life, freedom!” A year later, women, dissenting voices and ethnic minorities are still targeted in Iran.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprisings represent the first ever national protests in support of **women’s rights**. For years, and especially in the months before the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in police custody, the Iranian public had grown exhausted and outraged by the violence of the morality police and the pressure on **women**. Mahsa’s death ignited the pent-up anger of Iranians, especially women who were fed up with state violence, discrimination, and patriarchal rule. Building on decades of women’s resistance and the persistence of the women’s movement for equality, Iranian women played a central role in these protests. In fact, these protests should be seen as the culmination of over four decades of struggle by Iranian women, including against the mandatory hijab laws—struggles that have become intertwined with women’s daily lives. Women have participated in civil disobedience campaigns, organized online and offline networks, and challenged the mandatory hijab laws by removing their headscarves in public. They have faced violence, harassment, and imprisonment for their activism. Women have been a critical force in these protests, leading the resistance against the government’s patriarchal and discriminatory policies and demanding equal rights.

Iran’s security forces and judiciary responded to the protests by rounding up and detaining **rights defenders**, including hundreds of [women human rights defenders](#). Over the course of a few months, they arrested hundreds of women’s rights activists, feminists, civil society activists, scholars, lawyers, and journalists in a preemptive effort to prevent them from joining or leading protests. While some were released on a general pardon, many still face charges or remain in prison, including Niloofar Hamedi and Elahe Mohamadi, two journalists who covered the death and funeral of Mahsa Jina Amini. As the anniversary of Amini’s death approaches, state security has resumed detaining activists, including [12](#) in northern Iran and relatives of political prisoners and protesters killed by police. These pressures have severely affected Iran’s civil society, which was already weakened by decades of closed civic space and repression. Since the start of these protests, many activists have received heavy prison sentences and some have been forced to leave the country.

The protest movement has been remarkable for its capacity to build a diverse coalition that transcends ethnic, class, and regional divides in opposition to the Islamic Republic. What started as a women-oriented protest over the death of Mahsa Jina Amini soon expanded to other demands, such as economic justice and political freedom and change. Despite government suppression of the protests, the underlying drivers remain and the gap between the state and significant portions of society continues to widen.

One of the groups that has suffered the most from the government’s repression are **ethnic minorities**, who have faced killings, arrests, and attacks for decades. Building on decades of systematic discrimination against ethnic minority communities, such as

Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Turkamans and Azerbaijani Turk, the government dealt with protesters from these communities with greater brutality. In fact, authorities justified bloody crackdowns in regions with majority ethnic minority populations by labeling protests as separatist movements. Women from these ethnic groups have faced double repression, as they have been discriminated against both for their gender and ethnicity.

**Kurdish and Baluchi Iranians**, in particular, experienced severe oppression during the uprisings. A tragic example of this was the "Bloody Friday" massacre in Baluchistan on September 30, 2022. On that day, over 100 were [killed](#) by security forces as they protested after Friday Prayers. The protesters in Baluchistan were demanding justice for the reported rape of a young Baluchi woman by a police commander in the city of Chabahar. Kurdish provinces also experienced a high level of violence during suppression of protests. For example, in the city of Javanrood in Kermanshah province, Kurdish protestors were brutally [attacked](#) by security forces, and at least 89 persons were arrested, including 26 minors. These two communities have paid an exorbitant price for these protests as nearly half of those killed by state security were Baluchi and Kurdish citizens.

In the face of such repression, students and **online activists** have been another pillar of the protest movement, showing their courage and creativity. Online activists, especially the youth, have used the internet as a tool for communication, information, and mobilization. They have shared their stories, opinions, and demands with the world in inspiring ways. They have also collaborated with international human rights organizations, journalists, and celebrities to advocate for their cause and expose the Islamic Republic's abuses.

Meanwhile, **university student activists** have staged demonstrations in 183 universities nationwide in solidarity with the protest movement. The government has retaliated by imprisoning many students for their activism and expelling others, including professors, from academia.

The Iranian authorities have also resorted to unprecedented levels of **internet shutdowns and disruptions** as a way to silence dissent and isolate the Iranian people from the world. According to Filter.watch, an Iran-focused internet monitor, Iran experienced over four months of internet [blackouts](#) or slowdowns either nationwide or at the provincial level after Mahsa Jina Amini's death. Some cities, such as Zahedan, the capital of Balochistan province, have had their internet cut every Friday in conjunction with protests held after Friday prayers. These internet shutdowns in Zahedan have been going on for nearly a year, every Friday, without fail. This represents the most consistent pattern of internet censorship in Iran's history.

In addition to these shutdowns and disruptions, the Iranian government has also imposed **stricter filters on international platforms**, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, and enacted legislation that empowers the government to monitor, regulate, and identify individuals based on their online activities. These measures are part of the government's efforts to curtail freedom of expression and access to the global internet.

During the course of these uprisings, over 530 protestors, including 71 children, were [killed](#) by the security forces. At least [22,000](#) people in connection with the protests have been arrested, [including](#) 714 students, 63 journalists, and at least [300](#) women rights defenders. Many of those arrested have been subjected to torture, ill-treatment, unfair trials, and sexual harassment, including rape. At least 25 individuals were [sentenced](#) to death and 7 individuals executed for their connection to the protests. These figures show the scale and severity of the repression and violence that the Iranian people have faced for demanding their basic rights and freedoms.

We, the undersigned organizations, stand in solidarity with the Iranian people on the one year anniversary of Mahsa Jina Amini's death and the start of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings. We call on the international community to stand in solidarity with Iranians and especially Iranian women.

### **Recommendations to the International Community:**

- 1- Demand Iranian authorities to unconditionally release and end judicial proceedings for all protesters arrested, charged and sentenced in relation to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests.
- 2- Condemn the use of violence, repression and reprisals by Iranian authorities against peaceful protesters, including Iranian women who defy hijab laws. Efforts to punish Iranian women through the adoption of the draconian Bill for Protection of the Family through Promoting the Culture of Modesty and Hijab, will severely undermine women's rights to their bodies, and must be condemned by the international community.
- 3- Support VPNs and other tools that help Iranians bypass online filters and censorship and freely access the internet. These tools are vital, especially as public demand and the government's interference have increased since September 2022.
- 4- Social media platforms must monitor and prevent coordinated behavior targeting the accounts of Iranian human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders, and their initiatives or organizations.

5- Provide emergency funding, respite programs, and relocation for Iranian human rights defenders who are at risk or have fled the country.

6- Draw attention to the plight of ethnic minorities by naming the victims of state violence and publicly condemn the brutal actions of Iranian authorities against peaceful protestors.

7- Demand that Iranian authorities respect the independence of the judiciary and the fair trial rights of human rights defenders and protestors, including those sentenced to death or prison. Call on the UN Human Rights Council to investigate Iran's denial of legal representation and harassment of lawyers.

8- Urge the UN Office Of High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Special Procedures Mandate holders, to prioritize and systematically report on violations of human rights, women's rights, and the rights of ethnic minority groups in Iran.

9- Urge the United Nations fact-finding mission for Iran to document all cases of torture and deaths in custody during the protests.

We will not forget Mahsa Jina Amini, nor the thousands of Iranians who have sacrificed their lives or freedom for a better future. We will continue to monitor the situation in Iran and to amplify the voices of those who seek change.

**Signatories:**

- Afghan Women's News Agency
- Arseh Sevom
- Association for the Human Rights of the Azerbaijani People in Iran (AHRAZ)
- AWID
- Baloch Activists Campaign
- Bint al-Nil (Daughter of the Nile Foundation, Egypt)
- Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA)
- Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR)
- Defense Foundation for Rights and Liberties (Yemen)
- Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)
- Equality Fund
- Equality Now
- FEMALE (Lebanon)
- Femena
- Haalvsh
- International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

- Iranian Circle of Women's International Network
- Iranian Freedom and Welfare Party
- Iranian Women In Network (IWIN)
- Ismail Khoie Foundation
- Kayan Feminist Organization (Palestine)
- Kurdistan Human Rights Association-Geneva (KMMK-G)
- Kurdistan Human Rights Network
- Kurdistan Press Agency (Kurdpa)
- Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
- Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras)
- Miaan Group
- Minority Rights Group
- NOOR
- PEN America
- Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)
- Qarar Foundation for Media and Development (Yemen)
- Regional Coalition for WHRDs in Southwest Asia and North Africa (AKA WHRDMENA Coalition)
- Sexual Rights Initiative
- Shiwar News
- Siamak Pourzand Foundation (SPF)
- Syrian Feminist Lobby
- Takatoat (Jordan)
- Thaat Sustainable Development Foundation (Sudan)
- Turkaman Human Rights Activists (TUHRA)
- Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
- Virtual Activism
- Women for Women's Human Rights - New Ways (Turkey)
- Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)
- Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (Palestine)
- Women's Intercultural Network
- World Organisation against Torture (OMCT)

