

Vida Movahed, the woman who sparked anti-hijab protests in Iran



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“Revolutions give birth to their own leaders,” a Russian saying goes and it is just as true in Persian.

The latest revolutionary leader of Iran is Vida Movahed better known as “the girl of Enqelab [Revolution] Avenue.” As protests swept through Iran in late December, Movahed stood on a utility box, removed her white scarf, attached it to a stick and waved the makeshift flag at a crowd.

Video recordings of the incident were widely shared on social media as evidence of Iranian women's struggle against the compulsory hijab. Movahed was arrested and held until January 28 but her act had triggered a movement.

All over Iran, girls and women of all ages took off their white headscarves in a public place and attached them to a stick as family members recorded the act and distributed the images on social media. Police said 29 women were arrested in Tehran in recent weeks and charged with being unveiled in public.

The government released a poll

in which half of Iranian women respondents expresses opposition to compulsory wearing of the hijab.

Movahed's protest is the latest chapter in a historical struggle for Iranian women's right to wear – or not wear – the hijab. The little piece of cloth covering the heads of Iranian women has caused many headaches for the country's rulers over the past 80 years and there have been alternate attempts by the state to prohibit the hijab and to enforce it.

Iran's history of hijab protests can be traced to January 8, 1936, when Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, issued a decree known as “Kashf-e hijab” – removal of the veil. The move was inspired by social reforms instituted by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey and Amanullah Khan in Afghanistan.

The modernising authoritarian ruler of Iran considered the hijab an impediment to women's active participation in society. It was certainly thought to prevent female education and employment. At the time, modernising Middle Eastern elites considered the hijab's removal a precondition

for progress and Westernisation.

Reza Shah's anti-hijab decree remained in force until his abdication in 1941. For those five years, police officers forcibly removed the veil of any women who wore it in public. This led to violent protests, in particular in Mashhad, which were brutally suppressed by the Imperial Iranian Army. Women from religious families no longer left their homes.

Under Iran's last shah, there was no prohibition against the hijab but the regime encouraged and culturally propagated the idea of being unveiled. This caused sections of the opposition to the shah's regime to use the veil as a symbol.

During the 1979 revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was largely silent about the hijab, perhaps because he feared alienating the secular opposition to the shah's regime and all the female political activists. Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani and in particular secular revolutionary leaders guaranteed there would be no restrictions for women in the Islamic Republic. However, as soon as Khomeini consolidated power, he called for

the hijab to be compulsory.

On March 8, 1979 – International Women's Day – there were large demonstrations in Tehran against compulsory wearing of the hijab. The protests continued until March 10, when they were suppressed by thugs mobilised by the revolutionary leadership. By July 1980, Iranian women were not allowed to enter public buildings without a hijab.

Since the 1980s, Iranian women have engaged in a silent protest of sorts against the regime's policy on the hijab. They have challenged it to varying degrees by uncovering some of the hair. This has developed into a cat-and-mouse game with the religious police, enforcing the Islamic Republic's hijab code in the public arena.

Movahed and other critics of compulsory hijab, on the other hand, point at the fundamental hypocrisy behind the hijab legislation in the Islamic Republic: If women without a hijab are said to “excite” men, it is the men who should guard their gaze. Many Iranian women increasingly agree with Movahed even at the risk of imprisonment.

Tehran faces tough challenge dealing with population's economic expectations



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The poll results showed strong support among Iranians for the missile programme.



Iran's government faces a significant challenge in managing popular expectations of the economy, an opinion poll from the University of Maryland's IranPoll indicated.

Only 17% of Iranians asked said their family's circumstances have improved in the past four years and 75% of respondents said Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers has not improved living conditions of the Iranian people.

The survey was carried out by IranPoll from January 16-24, just after nationwide protests. It indicated that 69% of Iranians asked said the economy is “bad” and 58% said it was “getting worse.” Last June, poll data said 63% of those asked said the economy was “bad” and 50% said it was getting worse. Also, 63% in the recent poll said domestic economic mismanagement and corruption have done more damage to the Iranian economy than international sanctions.

No clear political message emerges from the poll. While the approval rating of Iranian President Hassan Rohani slipped from 75.5% in May 2017, just before his re-election, it is still fairly high at 65.5%.

While there was widespread sympathy for the protesters' demands, there was also strong backing for the police response. The poll indicated that 73% of respondents said the government was not doing enough to help the poor, 96% said it should do more against corruption and 63.9% affirmed their view police had used an “appropriate” amount of force. Only 14% of those asked said police had used too much force and 11% said they used too little.

Support is clearly eroding for the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A positive poll rating of 75.5% in August 2015, which was down to 67.1% in June 2017, fell to 55.1% the data from January indicated. Even more strikingly, 90.2% of Iranians asked said relations with the United States have



Tough future ahead. A man carries car parts at a market in Tehran.

(AP)

not improved or have worsened because of the agreement, up from 67.7% in May 2017.

Further evidence of Iranians reacting negatively to US President Donald Trump is a decline in America's favourability rating from 26.6% in June 2016 to 18.4% in the most recent poll. This compares to Germany at 61.7%, Russia at 58.5% and the United Kingdom at 30.4%.

This suggests that Iranians are braced for Trump to extend economic sanctions after his April deadline for JCPOA to be redrawn. Trump has demanded, among other changes, a ban on missile tests and unrestricted access of UN nuclear inspectors to military sites.

The poll results showed strong support among Iranians for the missile programme: 73.8% of respondents said it is “very important” and 21.1% “somewhat important” for Iran to develop missiles. Another 10.6% said they backed a

suggestion that Iran suspend tests until there is international confidence the devices are not designed for nuclear weapons.

In other findings that may be dismissed by advocates of tougher sanctions in the United States and elsewhere, the poll data give Lebanon's Hezbollah a favourability rating of 64.7%. That is, however, down from 72.7% in June 2016. Likewise, on the issue of assistance to Syria, 14.8% of respondents said the Iranian government should end assistance to President Bashar Assad; 30% of those asked said that assistance should be reduced and 48.5% backed continuing support until Assad “gains full control of all Syrian territories.”

Domestically, Rohani's principal critics seek to exploit grievances over the economy before parliamentary elections due in 2020. The IranPoll put Rohani's favourability rating comfortably

ahead of Ebrahim Raeisi, whom Rohani defeated in the presidential election in 2017. Raeisi, who is at 53.8% favourability, is spoken of as a possible candidate in 2021, when Rohani will be ineligible to stand for a third consecutive term as president.

However, far ahead of both Rohani and Raeisi in the popularity stakes, the IranPoll indicated, is Major-General Qassem Soleimani. He enjoys media prominence as commander of al-Quds brigade, the overseas arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has been active in Syria and Iraq. Soleimani's popularity has gone up from 74.2% in May 2017 to 82.7% in January, the poll indicated.

While many polls in Iran have proved unreliable, IranPoll has claimed many successes. In 2017, three days before the presidential election, its findings were 2 percentage points off of the official results.

IranPoll's latest poll suggested that with GDP growth returning – the Economist Intelligence Unit estimates 2.2 percentage points in 2017 and 2.3% in 2018 – the Rohani government has room to relax fiscal management. The poll showed marked concern over unemployment, stated by 49.5% of respondents as the most important problem facing Iran.

Rohani's office raised eyebrows when it released a 3-year-old government poll indicating that 49.8% of respondents said wearing the hijab is a private matter and should not be legally required. This involves the president in a contentious issue with the judiciary taking action against a recent wave of female demonstrators.

Other poll findings hint at further volatility. Fully 61% of Iranians asked said they use internet and social networking “a lot” to get news of domestic and international affairs. That is a noteworthy figure compared to the 35.6% who said the same of domestic television channels, which the authorities supervise. The political battles in cyberspace are surely set to heat up.