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DOMESTIC UNREST IN IRAN

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Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman arrested by Iran morality police on 13 September 2022 for wearing “unsuitable attire”¹ died in police custody on 16 September.² Amini's death struck a nerve, with protests spreading to dozens of Iranian cities and gaining international attention through social media despite severe internet restrictions in Iran. The protestors chanted “Death to the dictator” as against “Death to America” in the past



and women burned their headscarves, mandatory for women since the 1979 Islamic revolution.³ According to Iranian authorities, Amini had a stroke due to a preexisting condition in police custody and died in hospital. Her family has rejected the authorities' claims and have alleged she had been beaten in police custody. However, the forensic findings support the government's statement that Amini's death was “not caused by a blow to the head or important organ of the body” but she had underlying issues brought on by a surgery she had when she was eight-year-old to remove a benign brain tumor.⁴

The protests began in Amini's hometown of Saqqez in Kurdistan province and spread to majority of Iran's 31 provinces.⁵ A human-rights group said at least 185 people had died including 19 children in the heavy crackdown during the four weeks of protests⁶ and many more arrested. The western media was quick to capitalize on the incident to incite demonstrations within Iran and in major capitals of the world. The United States has issued new sanctions against seven senior military and security officials including the commander of the Iranian army's ground forces.⁷ Germany, France, Denmark, Spain, Italy and the Czech Republic have submitted 16 proposals for new EU sanctions against Iran due to use to violence against protestors.⁸ The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, echoed the call for security forces to stop using disproportionate force and demanded an “impartial” inquiry into the death of Mahsa Amini.⁹

Despite widespread protests and instability in Iran, the Iranian government has remained intact and deals with the unrest with counter-protests sponsored or supported by the government. The demonstrators, mostly university students have shown resilience and determination in the videos circulating on social media.

Analysis

Iran is experiencing domestic instability for number of reasons. The economy is under stress due to US maximum pressure sanctions, the youth is on the edge, the current regime is a hardline government with no tolerance for dissent. The death of Mahsa Amini in police custody worked like an ignition to a powder keg. In the last 25 years of the Iranian revolution, its streets have resounded with “Marg ber Amrika”. This is perhaps the first time that Tehran has witnessed protests calling for death to dictator. The protests are more violent than any in Iran’s history. It is an inflection point for Iran and the west is encouraging the Iranian diaspora to join in and call for a regime change. Most commentaries in western media claim that the purpose of the protests is to change the regime in Tehran.

The Iranian government did not expect such violent demonstrations. Many young people have died in Police custody in the past. Protests are usually allowed in a designated area, sometimes within a university to let the students vent out their sentiments. A strict vigil is kept and mostly people disperse peacefully. The current wave of protests have a distinct flavour. Young girls are protesting, burning their hijabs that are portrait in the west as a symbol of oppression and discrimination against women.

The government of Iran has warned against foreign intervention in Iran’s domestic affairs. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has accused the US and Israel of fomenting the unrest.¹⁰ President Ebrahim Raisi has expressed sadness at the death of the young woman in custody but he warned that “chaos is unacceptable” and pledged to deal “decisively “with the nationwide protests,¹¹ and said that “the adversaries planned a plot to isolate Iran at a time when it is making diplomatic and economic progress.”¹²

In a highly inciting video that has gone viral on social media, an Iranian girl and her brother are shown to burn the Quran. The girl does not resemble Mahsa. Iran has called it a planned US and Zionist plot to destabilize the government.¹³ The Iranian Intelligence Ministry has claimed that the rioters were backed by Western regimes and their media outlets through a misinformation campaign and distorted the sequence of events even before official investigation into the incident was completed.¹⁴ The government has blocked Twitter.

In support of Iranian women, protests have taken place around the world. The demonstration began at Trocadero Square in the heart of Paris to show solidarity with the protestors. Iranians living abroad chanted “Death to the Islamic Republic” and anti-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei slogans.¹⁵

The West will exploit the wave of discontent to indict Iran for human rights violations. Attempt in the past have been made in various countries to first create discontent, and then exploit it to achieve a certain objective. The Arab Spring was dubbed as a wave of popular support for democracy. It turned out that strong Arab leaders were outside, governance was disrupted that led to insecurity in the region. Human rights argument is currently being used against Afghanistan and Pakistan has experienced similar pressure in the past.

The timing of the protests is significant. The long and arduous negotiations on the JCPOA, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal are at their final stage and Iran is strengthening its relations with Russia amid the Ukraine crisis. The United States is trying to pressure Iran to sign the nuclear deal without fulfilling the guarantees demanded by the Iranian government. However, if Iran feels threatened and instability increases, it will likely pursue its nuclear weapons programme. The Ukraine crisis has taught an important lesson to smaller countries that nuclear weapons are a shield for peace and to suspend their nuclear programme or give up nuclear assets encourage military actions by major powers on various pretexts.

The western sanctions have slowed down Iran’s economy over the past several years. Its currency, the rial, has lost eightfold in value and inflation has been hovering around 40% for more than a year.¹⁶ The Ukraine crisis has given a life line to Iran’s economy. Iran is strengthening ties with Russia to challenge the US and Europe after being forced into a corner. Although Tehran has not officially sided with Russia on Ukraine, many official including President Ebrahim Raisi have implicitly accused Ukraine of inciting Russia to attack by attempting to join NATO.

Instability in Iran will have repercussions for Pakistan as a spill over effect. The border control between Pakistan and Iran has been difficult for a longtime. The easement rights that separated tribes on both sides had made the border suitable for criminal activity.¹⁷ While Iran will push to strengthen its ties

with Russia and China, Pakistan has not yet decided to approach Russia for low priced oil imports despite its dire energy shortages. India has already slurped the Russian oil at very low rates, and so has China.

Conclusion

In the face of violent crackdown, the wave of protests has not only continued but more and more

people from all classes, ages, religions and ethnicities are banding together. However, another revolution and regime change is unlikely as the western world may wish for. The government in Tehran is tough and in control. But instability will have lasting negative effects on Iranian economy, the peoples life in the longrun and the regional instability.

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