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Iran

“The Iranian uprising has the features of a revolution”

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This interview is republished from *Il Manifesto* who spoke about the uprising with Fariborz Kamkari, a Kurdish-Iranian director, author of the films *The Flowers of Kirkuk* and *Being Kurdish*, among others, and the novel *Return to Iran*.

It's not easy to get accurate news of the uprising that has been ripping through Iran this week: internet access is very poor, cut by Tehran. On Wednesday [21 September], the latest app to be deactivated was Instagram.

The protest is certainly spreading, with almost all the provinces now involved. At least 14 protesters have been killed, hundreds injured and the number of those arrested is unknown. In Rojhilat, in Iranian Kurdistan, a general strike has been called.

Women are on the front lines: they're burning their veils, cutting their hair, clashing with the police. The uprising was sparked by the killing of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini last Friday at the hands of the morality police. An adviser to Ayatollah Khamenei expressed condolences to her family, and the religious leader reportedly promised to investigate.

But the slogans are clear: “Death to the dictator” and “Woman, life, freedom.” In the city of Sari, a protester climbed up the facade of the City Hall and destroyed the image of Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Republic.

On Wednesday, Anonymous, the hacker collective, called on by Iranians on social media to help take down government websites, also intervened: it appears to have been successful, blocking state TV and some government services for a few hours.

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What is happening in Iran?

This is not a revolt of the kind that happens every year now: this time it has the features of a revolution. For four reasons. Firstly, for the first time in 43 years, it involves the whole country and not just a part of it, be it Kurdistan or the Arab-majority southeast, as happened two weeks ago – protests which were immediately quelled. Secondly, all social classes are taking part: in the past we have seen protests by the petty bourgeoisie, other times by the lower classes. This time, the poor, the workers and the middle class are all taking part. Third, they are not mobilizing for economic reasons: the people are demanding freedom. Fourth, it is completely out of the control of any organization within the regime, which for years has shown a double face, reformists versus conservatives. Today the revolt is against the regime itself, and you can tell this by the united reaction of all political forces. Burning the veil is burning the flag: this regime has used the veil as a representation of its ideology. Today, the people are saying “no” to the entire political system of the country, to the very nature of the Islamic Republic.

Why now? Was Amini's death the spark for dissent that needed an outlet?

Her real name was not Mahsa, but Jhina. In Iran we cannot use Kurdish names, which remain unofficial, different from the official names on identity documents. Jhina means “new life.” And she is indeed giving a new life to the country. It happened now because Iran has already been suffocating for some time. In the last eight years there have been cyclical uprisings, but the regime has managed to keep them disconnected from each other, using various tools. Let’s take Kurdistan: there have been protests there since 1979 – as Khomeini was being carried up in triumph, the Kurdish parties had already coined the slogan “Autonomy for Kurdistan, democracy for Iran.” The regime is scaring Iranians about the Kurdish uprisings, saying that they are separatists. If workers are protesting, the regime puts fear into the middle class.

But this time, the uprising is the accumulation of all the suffering of the Iranian people. The economic situation is terrible, but the slogan that resonated is the right to choose for oneself. For decades, when we challenged the mandatory headscarf, many responded that this was hardly the main issue. Today people are showing that it is, because it represents individual freedom, the ability to choose for oneself, the symbol of one’s will. Iranians are not only asking for bread or jobs, but for freedom. Other times we were told that the hijab is a feature of our culture. It is not: it was imposed by the Islamic revolution that forced women to wear it. By burning the veil, they are burning that myth.

What role do women play?

The system has been designed to marginalize women and take any political, cultural, social role away from them. A woman must be a wife and mother, her duty is to procreate and raise children. Iranian women have never accepted this and have always been the engine of change. Go to Iran and you will see that they do everything. This is a women’s revolution because it is they who are organizing the street protests, who are going against the police, who are burning the veils. And they are supported by the men – that’s what’s new. The regime has been cunning in creating divisions that have also cut through the family home: if you create a system in favor of men, men become the representatives of the regime even within the home. Today, however, they are on the side of the women.

What about the young people?

Today, young people use the internet, they know the world outside, they are harder to tame. 60% of Iran’s population is under 30, people who don’t remember or didn’t participate in the great uprisings of 1999 and 2009. The universities have awakened. After the 2009 protests, the regime had managed to quell the students, but today they are a new engine of protest against the attempt to exclude them from political and social discourse.

Will Tehran be able to show flexibility, concede some things in order to survive?

That’s hard, because it is built on these principles. If they fail, the whole scaffolding of the Islamic Republic comes crashing down. That’s why it doesn’t change, despite the fact that the majority of Iranians no longer want the hijab or control over their personal freedom. In big cities, citizens are treated more gently, but in small towns or in Kurdistan they are handled with violence. And nobody pays for this violence: as we speak, President Raisi is at the UN General Assembly, yet he is the “judge of death”: in 1988 he took part in passing the death sentence on 6,000 political prisoners, mostly mujaheddin and communists. But he’s taking part in the international assembly.

Among the demands of the protests is the abolition of the morality police.

The morality police was one of Khomeini’s first inventions to build his ideal society, in the face of the majority of the population’s opposition to the hijab or other public behavior not in line with the regime’s principles, from clothing to hairstyle to language. From the beginning of the revolution, many of us remember corporal punishments, such as

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needles to the forehead. The morality police is an effective tool to terrorize, especially against young people: it is in front of every high school and every university, it controls how people dress, what they write on their phones. It stops cars in which there are both men and women to check their family relationships. But anyway, the current protest doesn't just want the end of the morality police, but the end of the whole nature of the regime.

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Source [II Manifesto](#).

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