

WLUML SPOTLIGHT

Dont let Islamophobia be the legacy

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Protests have erupted in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini, 22. Iranian morality police arrested her for allegedly violating hijab rules. The protests have been led by women, who have burned their mandatory hijabs and cut their hair. The Iranian government has aggressively pushed back against protesters, including restricting internet access, shooting, and using ambulances as vehicles to make arrests. As of Sunday evening, Iran Human Rights (IHR) reported that at least 57 people had died, although it noted that the ongoing internet blackouts were making it increasingly difficult to confirm the number of deaths.

This is the generation raised by parents that remember life well before the revolution. In the past 43 years, the government has instrumentalized Islam, destroying its citizens. Politicisation and exploitation of religion are the key points here, and the West needs to be cautious in the future. In reporting on the burning of hijabs and the cutting of hair, Western media misses the point, presenting a story that sadly may propagate anti-Islamic views, as the protests have brought the topic of the hijab back to the forefront. Women in Iran are not denouncing the hijab exclusively, they are protesting the state's erosion of freedom of choice, a choice that is guaranteed by the Islamic faith, despite the regime's claims. What this regime has promoted is what I call 'spiritual gaslighting'.

As an atheist and secularist, I strongly believe that human rights should be independent of race and religion, however, some discourses on social media can be harmful. If we bring Islam into the conversation, we should have a better understanding of what we are discussing. The regime has consistently marginalised women through misinterpretations of Islamic texts and cultural justifications. However, women played a significant role in society during early Islamic history. Islam sees men and women created from the same soul by God, and therefore they must be treated with equal dignity. The Islamic traditions narrate that over the course of his lifetime, the Prophet upheld female dignity by allowing women to become prominent members of society. In her role as a religious authority, his wife A'isha taught famous scholars about the Qur'an and Hadith and engaged in debates on complex jurisprudence and commentary issues. The importance of equality and dignity is also shown in the right of women to have agency over their future husbands by fusing or accepting the marriage. Furthermore, one of the crucial principles from the Qur'an is that religion should not be forced, hence the veil should not be forced either.

Women in Iran are not condemning Islam, but rather taking on a state which has used Islam as a weapon against them. People of different religious and secular beliefs walk the streets of Iran, including women who want to wear the hijab. The misinterpretation of this protest may promote Islamophobia as is already visible in many comments online. Thus, it is important to counter this by underlining that this regime has even alienated people identifying as Muslim.

Ayatollah Khomeini used Islam to foster support for his regime in 1979. Despite the Iranian authorities' attempts to do the same for 43 years, young Iranians are now connected to the rest of the world and tech-savvy; therefore, they will no longer be easily manipulated. Information is power for everyone. Thus, we must educate and prevent the spread of islamophobia in the West. State control, not religion, is at the heart of this protest.

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