

THE FULL STORY

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Iran's New—Even Worse—Hijab Era Has Begun

On the eve of parliamentary elections, nationwide protests have ended—and a misogynist backlash is just beginning.

By [Saqi Nassiri](#), the pseudonym of a journalist in Iran, and [Tooba Moshiri](#), the pseudonym of a journalist in Iran.



Two young Iranian girls, not wearing the mandatory hijab, visit a park in Tehran. HOSSEIN BERIS/MIDDLE EAST IMAGES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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As Shadi prepares to become a mother for the first time, the Iranian 30-year-old is so concerned about her unborn daughter's future that she is considering leaving her homeland.



Iran has imposed a strict dress code on women since a revolution swept the ruling Islamic regime into power 45 years ago, obliging them to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothes. Authorities have stepped up enforcement of the rules since the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022 triggered major protests across the country, during which women openly flouted the code. Last year, Iran's parliament approved a bill to strengthen punishments for such violations.

Although the protests have subsided, the hijab has been a prominent issue ahead of the elections that will occur on the first day of March for Iran's parliament and the executive council that appoints the country's supreme leader. Turnout is expected to be low, with young voters particularly disillusioned with the political process—a trend that contributed to the 2022 protests. A recent poll found that only 30 percent of Iranians intend to vote, according to the semiofficial Iranian Students' News Agency. Many are also voting with their feet and migrating to other countries.

Shadi said that she worried about her daughter growing up in an “environment that denies her her most basic rights,” adding, “I want to move as soon as possible to a country where basic freedoms are more readily available.”

Such freedoms are increasingly under threat for Iran's female citizens, according to women's rights advocates and United Nations experts, who say the hijab crackdown is creating a chilling effect on

being fired, or getting hit with fines if the hijab is not worn—or worn too loosely. “This crackdown on women’s dress code will further degrade women’s rights to work, study, drive, and participate fully in public life,” said Rothna Begum, a senior women’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The hijab bill was passed in September and is still awaiting its expected approval by the Guardian Council—Iran’s hard-line watchdog body—before it can become law. It would increase fines, introduce jail sentences of up to 10 years for women who defy dress rules, and widen gender segregation in places ranging from universities and hospitals to parks. U.N. experts have said it could amount to “gender apartheid.”

“The Iranian authorities have been doubling down their oppressive methods of policing and are punishing women and girls to quell widespread defiance of degrading and discriminatory compulsory veiling laws since the popular ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ uprising,” said Mansoureh Mills, an Iran researcher for Amnesty International.

Amini’s death, which occurred under police custody after she was arrested for allegedly wearing her hijab too loosely, triggered some of the worst political unrest seen in Iran in decades. While the protests have ebbed, women continue to defy the dress code by posting photos online of themselves unveiled or going out in public without the headscarf.

Anahid, a 21-year-old performing arts student, said she was pulled over in December by police in Tehran while driving and told that her car was being impounded because she had violated the dress regulations. Anahid—whose name has been changed for her protection—said she spent five days dealing with various government offices over the issue and had to pay fines totaling more than \$110 to reclaim her vehicle.

“Driving in the streets of the capital has become perilous ... but I will not allow such intimidation to alter my driving or clothing,” Anahid said, recounting how some of her female friends had experienced similar incidents.

Whether women do not wear the hijab properly while behind the wheel, at the workplace or simply sitting at a cafe, penalties for noncompliance can be severe. Women convicted of violating veiling laws have been subjected to “degrading punishments,” including being forced to wash dead bodies for Islamic burials and clean government buildings, according to a report published in August 2023 by Javaid Rehman, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Iran.

But it’s not just women who are falling foul of the dress code and being penalized. Ali, a 40-year-old man who owns a cafe on Tehran’s Keshavarz Boulevard, said his business had been shut down twice by authorities because his female customers were not wearing the hijab properly. Authorities have

Under the Hijab and Chastity Bill, businesses that flout the law could be fined up to three months of their income. But Ali—who asked that his real name be withheld for security concerns—said he supported the protest movement and that he would not ask women visiting his cafe to cover their hair. “I won’t do it, no matter the losses,” said Ali, who said he expected more raids on his business and further closures over dress code violations. “It’s a normal price to be paid for change to happen in the country.”

Hard-line clerics, top judges, and President Ebrahim Raisi have repeatedly issued warnings in recent months to women who violate the dress code, according to Iran International, a London-based television station that is critical of the Iranian government. At a public event in August, Raisi said, “I am telling you that the removal of the hijab will definitely come to an end.”

Iran is regularly ranked as one of the worst countries to be a woman in terms of gender parity for economic opportunities, education, health concerns, and political leadership, according to research by the World Bank and the World Economic Forum (WEF). Although more women graduate from university than men, Iran has one of the lowest rates of female employment and biggest gender pay gaps worldwide, the WEF’s latest Gender Gap Report shows.

Masoumeh Bagheri, a member of a state-appointed team to empower women who are heads of households in Tehran province, said there is still an entrenched belief in Iran that women belong in the home, and added that their role in society is widely seen as “secondary, complementary, and sometimes unnecessary.”

Such attitudes have left Samira Akbari, a jobless, 25-year-old computer science graduate in Tehran, pessimistic about her career prospects. Akbari—who also asked that her real name be withheld—said she was delighted when she landed her first permanent job for an online store in July 2023 after years of taking short-term contracts to build up her resume. But she was fired after just three weeks and replaced by a male intern.

Akbari said she did not know if hijab regulations played a part in her dismissal, but that her boss had explained that her male colleagues were uncomfortable with her presence.

“I would’ve understood if I was performing poorly, but instead, it’s my teammates not being comfortable around women that got me sacked,” said Akbari, who has since been unemployed.

This article has been published in collaboration with Egab.

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