

Press release**Technische Universität Dresden****Claudia Kallmeier**

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Politics
transregional, national**Historically, women-led uprisings tend to lead to significant transformation**

Over the past two weeks, many Iranians have been protesting against the regime, triggered by the violent death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman. Videos of the protests are spreading, especially via social media. In an interview, political scientist Prof. Nikita Dhawan talks about the background of the current developments and the extent to which they could change the systems in place in Iran in the future.

What triggered the protests in Iran?

Prof. Dr. Nikita Dhawan: On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, was arrested by the morality police for violating the hijab law. She died in hospital in Tehran under suspicious circumstances. While the police claim that she had a heart attack, eyewitnesses and leaked medical scans reveal that she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage as a result of police brutality. This triggered a series of large-scale protests across the country.

Are these the first protests of their kind in Iran?

Dhawan: Iran's anti-veil protests have a long history. On March 7, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who seized power in the aftermath of the revolution that toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, announced that all women must wear a hijab. The very next day – International Women's Day – tens of thousands of unveiled women took to the streets to march in protest. Since then, there have been regular protests against compulsory hijab-wearing.

Are primarily younger generations taking to the streets in Iran?

Dhawan: Over 60 percent of Iran's 80 million inhabitants is under 30 years old and Iranian women make up more than 60 percent of first-year university students. According to reports, the protests are decentralized, with young women spearheading the demonstrations, setting their headscarves on fire and cutting their hair. Universities such as Tehran's prestigious Sharif University of Technology are significant sites of student mobilization. Therefore, they are particularly targeted by security forces.

Could the protests lead to the collapse of the systems in place in Iran?

Dhawan: Despite heavy international media coverage and support, it has been pointed out that coherent leadership and coordination is missing. Furthermore, lack of support in the military and a complete digital shutdown are key elements that may impact the outcome. Having said that, the fall of the USSR and of the Berlin Wall are testimony to the unpredictable nature of protest movements.

How could the protests change Iranian society for the better in the long term?

Dhawan: The civic uprisings in Sri Lanka earlier this year led to the overthrow of a corrupt and authoritarian regime. Research data also indicates that historically, women-led uprisings tend to lead to significant transformation.

Short bio:

Prof. Nikita Dhawan has held the Chair of Political Science with a focus on Political Theory and History of Ideas since October 1, 2021. Nikita Dhawan's research and interests concentrate on global justice, human rights, and democracy and decolonization.

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