Developments in the field

Multiple Discrimination and Identity-based violence: Observations on the 2022 ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Movement in Iran

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Introduction

In addition to ethnicity, nationality, race, religion and language, gender is also an attribute that co-determines human identity. The description in this article of the current protest movement in Iran testifies that gender is also politically relevant. Owing to the relative novelty of this case, I first contribute with this short article about this phenomenon in this volume of our journal and discuss multiple forms of discrimination and identity-based violence. In subsequent volumes of our journal we intend to discuss such phenomena more elaborately, which may attribute to a further theoretical and thematical development of EthoGeoPolitics as an academic (sub-)discipline.

Mahsa Amini’s death

Mahsa Jina (Zhina) Amini was a 22-years-old woman from Saghez, a small town within Kurdistan province in western Iran, whose death unleashed demonstrations and riots throughout the country which were unparalleled in size, determination and scope.
On 16 September 2022 Mahsa died in hospital under suspicious circumstances after having been in police custody; she died in any case due to her wounds, being ignored by the police officers after she was arrested by the so-called morality police, allegedly because her hijab (traditional headscarf mandated for Muslim women) was not decent enough.

One must realise that Mahsa Amini was from a small provincial place whose cloths and hijab are more conservative compared to those of urban girls. The morality police has been criticised for roughly handling such situations before, and allegedly using violence against the arrested.

The obligatory hijab in Iran’s current theocracy is an explosive issue which can evoke fiery responses. Many Iranian men and women, young and old, opine that the hijab should not be mandatory but rather voluntary like in most other countries, and certainly no violence should be used in its enforcement.

Soon in response to Masha Amini’s death a potentially revolutionary protest movement was born, named ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ after its main slogan and demand chanted in the streets, which has attracted countless men and women throughout Iran, and aims to realise all basic human rights for all Iranians. Even though it was not confined to it, women’s rights were among its main objectives from the start.

—As a case of identity-based violence

The death of Mahsa Amini is clearly a case of multiple discrimination and violence, i.e. identity-based discrimination and violence. She might have lived if she had had other ascriptive features.
Mahsa was a young (age), girl (gender), from a small Sunni Kurdish town on a trip to Tehran (ethno-religious/geographic belonging).

Soon spontaneous protests all across Iran were organised condemning violence by the morality police. In her home town in Iranian Kurdistan the protests escalated into fights with the police and security forces, with demonstrators chanting “I will revenge my sister”. Mahsa was together with her younger 17-years-old brother when she was arrested in Tehran. However, it is not certain whether the chanting was initiated by Masha's brother or was started spontaneously by anybody else in Kurdistan and other parts of Iran.

Overall more men have been and are being killed by Iran's current regime for political, ideological or social reasons, over ten times more than women. However in the case of Mahsa Amini, there is a clear case of identity-based violence: because she would not have been arrested and maltreated on the charges of violating Hijab had she not been a young (age) girl (gender) from Kurdish descent (belonging) in the first place.

Crucially, the fact that she was from a small Sunni Kurdish town has played a defining role in this tragedy (ethno-religious background /centre-periphery dynamics), as this made her position weaker and the power imbalance vis-à-vis the authorities even larger.

Owing to the social tribal structure in Iranian Kurdistan, protests and suppressions there could lead to inter-tribal violence and feuds. Such a dynamic also exists in Baluchistan, another region of Iran where the protests are going on to this day.
Conclusion

More generally, the peoples in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchistan, being Sunni Muslim communities, clearly feel discriminated once again vis-à-vis the Shi'ite majority in Iran. However, numerous members of the Shi'ite majority in the central parts of Iran have joined the protests from day one, vocally supporting Kurdish and Baluchi demands for equality.

All in all, everyone in Iran, male and female, young and old and of whichever ethnic and religious group, experiences lack of freedom and suppression of demonstrations in one way or another. Yet the case of Mahsa Amini demonstrates the way how her own particular identity as a young, Sunni Kurdish woman has made her particularly vulnerable to arrest and lethal attacks—in ways which would not have been probable had she had other biological and social characteristics.

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