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ARTICLE

Iran's 2025–2026 Protests and the Urgency of Breaking the Cycle of Authoritarianism

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Abstract
This essay analyzes the protest cycle that began in Iran in late December 2025, situating it within a century-long history of authoritarian state formation and contested political representation. It argues that these protests express not only opposition to the Islamic Republic, but also a recurring structural problem in Iranian politics: the tendency of moments of mass mobilisation to replace one "master" with another rather than to transform the underlying political order. Drawing on protest reports, media coverage, and statements by political actors, the article traces the movement's expansion, internal heterogeneity, and the intensification of repression. It pays particular attention to struggles over political representation, including efforts by monarchist actors to appropriate the protests through personalised leadership narratives. The essay concludes that breaking Iran's cycle of authoritarianism requires moving beyond master substitution toward democratic pluralism, decentralisation, collective rights, and collective self-determination.

Keywords: Authoritatrianism, Protest Movements, Narrative Appropriation, Replacement of Masters, Pahlavi Dynasty

Introduction

The protest wave that began in Iran in late 2025 emerged at a moment of unusual historical resonance. It coincided with the centenary of the modern Iranian state, established in 1925 under Reza Khan Pahlavi and institutionalized through the Pahlavi monarchy. Over the subsequent century, Iran has been governed primarily through two regime forms: an absolutist monarchy (with only a limited, short-lived period of partial political opening early in Mohammad Reza Shah's reign) and, after 1979, the Islamic Republic structured around the Dextrine of *velayat-e motlaq-e faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist). Despite their ideological and institutional divergence, both orders have been characterized by strong centralization, coercive

state capacity, and a recurrent tendency to treat dissent as a security threat[1]. The result is not simply a sequence of two different dictatorships, but a longer historical pattern in which political authority repeatedly consolidates itself through exclusion, repression, and the monopolization of representation.

In recent years, the Islamic Republic has faced intensifying domestic and international crises. Since the Green Movement of 2009, Iran has experienced successive cycles of anti-regime contention. These cycles have not followed a linear trajectory, but they have cumulatively exposed deeper fractures in the state's legitimacy and its capacity to govern through consent. The protests of 2025–2026 are the most recent, and among the most radical, manifestations of this longer protest trajectory. This essay asks three interrelated questions. First, how did this protest cycle begin and expand? Second, what are its main characteristics, particularly its internal heterogeneity across regions and social groups? Third, how have external political actors, especially monarchist forces and pro–Reza Pahlavi media, sought to interpret and appropriate the protests' meaning? Addressing these questions requires avoiding presentism: rather than treating the current protests as a self-contained event, the analysis situates them within longer histories of state formation, authoritarian governance, and contested political representation in Iran.

The Spark and the Expansion of the Protests

On 28 December 2025, Tehran's bazaar merchants-initiated strikes and protests in response to accelerating inflation, sharp currency volatility, and the rising cost of everyday life. These actions quickly diffused beyond Tehran to other cities and regions. Within a short period, the protests underwent a shift in both framing and target: what began as mobilization driven primarily by economic grievances evolved into explicitly political contention against the Islamic Republic.

Economic hardship constituted the immediate trigger, but it is analytically insufficient to treat material deprivation as the sole cause. The deeper conditions lie in a broader crisis of political mediation that intensified after the decline of reformism as a credible pathway for change. After nearly two decades in which reformist politics repeatedly promised gradual

[1] See Hassaniyan, Alan, and Gareth Stansfield. "The Kurdish protest movement and the Islamic republic of Iran: the securitisation of Kurdish nationalism." (2022). And Soleimani, Kamal, and Ahmad Mohammadpour. "The securitisation of life: Eastern Kurdistan under the rule of a Perso-Shi'i state." *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2020): 663-682.

transformation within the system, significant segments of society concluded that meaningful reform was structurally blocked. This disillusionment was already visible during the 2017–2018 protests, when the slogan "Reformists, hardliners—the game is over"[2] signaled a broad rejection of the regime's managed pluralism. In this context, economic grievances became a vehicle through which broader political frustration could be articulated and generalized.

Several structural processes converged to produce the background conditions for this mobilization. These include international isolation linked to Iran's nuclear and missile programs, extensive sanctions, and the fiscal and distributive pressures associated with prolonged external confrontation. They also include regional interventionism, systemic corruption, and widening social inequality. Internally, political repression has intensified alongside efforts by the Supreme Leader and his allies to "purify" the political field by marginalizing rival factions and further restricting elite competition. Military setbacks renewed "maximum pressure" dynamics, and the erosion of the regime's economic governance capacity have compounded these pressures. Under such circumstances, protest mobilization becomes more likely not simply because people are materially worse off, but because the regime's ability to translate coercion into governability weakens it can repress, but it cannot stabilize.

As mobilization expanded, the Islamic Republic responded in a familiar manner: coercion escalated. Security forces, drawing on a long institutional repertoire of suppressing civil unrest, intensified crackdowns across multiple locations. Repression reached a deadly peak in Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan, where several demonstrators were killed, and armed forces extended repression into spaces such as hospitals[3]. This violence further radicalized the protest environment.

Ten days after the initial outbreak, on 6 January 2026, the Kurdistan Parties Dialogue Center (comprising seven Kurdish political parties) issued a call for coordinated protests on Thursday, 8 January, both in support of the nationwide uprising and in response to the killing of protesters in Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan[4]. The call was endorsed by a broad spectrum of Iranian opposition organizations, including the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran[5],

[2] Kazemzadeh, Masoud. *Mass protests in Iran: From resistance to overthrow*. Vol. 38. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2023.
[3] https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/05/khrn-end-security-forces-siege-of-imam-khomeini-hospital-in-ilam-arrest-of-injured-protesters
[4] https://kurdistanmedia.com/so/news/2026/01/100
[5] https://shorturl.at/5Ajv0

the Left Party of Iran[6], the United Front of Baluchistan[7], cultural and political organizations from Turkmen Sahra, Turkmen civil associations, the Turkmen National Movement, Democratic Turkmens of Iran[8], six women's rights organizations, and various political figures. The result was a significant act of collective mobilization: in more than fifty cities across Eastern Kurdistan, and in many Iranian cities, people went on strike and closed their shops[9].

A few hours after this call gained public attention, Reza Pahlavi issued a message urging people to chant slogans from their homes and in the streets on Thursday and Friday. Given the historical pattern whereby Kurdish society often responds to party-led calls for strikes, the timing of this message is politically meaningful. It suggests an attempt to align his intervention with an already-existing organizational initiative rooted in Kurdistan, thereby enabling pro-Pahlavi media to reframe Kurdish collective action as part of a Pahlavi-centered narrative.

The protests have continued beyond these initial episodes and remain dynamic. External actors, including the United States and some European states, have expressed support, and Persian-language broadcasters such as VOA Persian have expanded programming framed as supportive coverage. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has intensified repression, including internet shutdowns that disrupt information flows and impede reliable reporting of casualties and arrests. Within this informational environment, human rights organizations have attempted to document violence. For instance, according to a report attributed to the Hengaw human rights organization, by 11 January 2026 the identities of 50 people allegedly killed by direct fire from state forces had been verified, including at least 23 Kurds, 19 Lurs, 4 Gilaks, 6 children under 18, and 2 women, with additional cases under verification[10]. Recent developments further underscore the escalating violence of the state response. Some media outlets report that more than 500 protesters have been killed by regime security forces[11].

In parallel, the Islamic Republic has intensified a discursive strategy long embedded in its repertoire of rule: the systematic reclassification of protest as a security threat. What initially appeared as the familiar framing of demonstrations as "riots" and protesters as externally orchestrated "troublemakers" has now escalated into a far more dangerous register. Ali Larijani, head of the Supreme National Security Council, has described the ongoing protests as a "civil

[6] https://www.bepish.org/fa/node/13272
[7] https://kurdistanmedia.com/so/news/2026/01/90
[8] https://kurdistanmedia.com/so/news/2026/01/93
[9] https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/080120264
[10] https://t.me/Hengaw_kurdi/13488
[11] https://www.dw.com/en/iran-protests-death-toll-rises-to-over-538-activists/live-75463923

war," a designation that marks a qualitative shift in the regime's approach to dissent. This framing recasts popular mobilisation as armed hostility. The political logic of such a move is clear: once protesters are no longer recognised as citizens expressing grievances but are redefined as enemies, violence against them can be justified as self-defence rather than repression. The transition from criminalisation to militarisation significantly replaces governance through coercion with the logic of internal war.

The Plural Character of the Protests

A defining feature of Iranian protest politics is heterogeneity. Protest cycles in Iran rarely constitute a single coherent movement with uniform demands, leadership, or social base. Instead, they typically reflect the country's social stratification, ethno-national diversity, regional inequalities, and uneven patterns of organizational capacity. The 2025–2026 protests exemplify this pattern. During the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, for instance, protest slogans and demands in Kurdistan were shaped by the region's political conditions and histories of repression, while mobilization in Baluchistan reflected distinct local trajectories of marginalization and state violence. Similar dynamics are evident here.

Across Iran, regime overthrow and freedom remain central themes in protest discourse. Yet in Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and other non-Persian regions, demands for ethno-national rights and self-determination are not peripheral add-ons; they are structurally embedded in local political claims and experiences. In Kurdistan, political parties continue to function as primary mobilizing actors and maintain close ties to different segments of society. In Persian-majority regions, by contrast, there are no comparable mass-based parties with the same historical embeddedness; mobilization tends to emerge through a mix of spontaneous initiatives, informal networks, and episodic interventions by political factions, including reformists in earlier phases.

Support for Reza Pahlavi has appeared in some Persian-speaking areas and in parts of Luristan, especially among constituencies disillusioned with reformism and lacking alternative organizational infrastructures capable of projecting a national political program. However, available videos from inside Iran do not support the claim that such support represents the majority even within those regions. In non-Persian ethno-national regions, national demands continue to structure much of the protest discourse.

Participation has also varied geographically so far. Large metropolitan centers such as Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz have seen substantial street mobilization, while cities

such as Qazvin, Hamedan, and others have also featured prominently. At the same time, Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan were particularly visible in the early stages and experienced intense repression. In some non-Persian regions, participation has been shaped by concerns about narrative appropriation by monarchist forces and by historically grounded expectations of disproportionate repression. Both the Pahlavi state and the Islamic Republic have governed peripheral regions through securitized frameworks, often applying more severe coercion than in central areas. Kurdish parties, for their part, have thus far emphasized strikes and solidarity actions rather than consistently calling for large-scale street mobilization, a choice that can be read as tactical under conditions of heightened repression and contested representation.

Monarchist Appropriation of the Protests

The struggle over protest meaning is not merely interpretive; it is a contest over political authority and legitimacy. In this context, monarchist forces and pro–Reza Pahlavi media outlets outside Iran have mobilized substantial resources to promote an interpretive frame that portrays the protests as a pro-monarchy movement. In some cases, these outlets and their supporters have been accused of manipulating protest videos, adding voiceovers, or replacing original chants with slogans aligned with monarchist preferences. The broader dynamic is the attempt to convert dispersed protest signals into a coherent narrative of personalized leadership.

This effort directly clashes with the protest's empirically observable plurality. The most frequently reported slogans in this protest cycle, alongside "Death to Khamenei" and "Death to the dictator", have been calls for "freedom." These chants articulate rejection of authoritarian rule rather than endorsement of a single replacement leader or regime form. In protest cycles characterized by coercion and uncertainty, negative unity ("against the dictator") often precedes positive unity ("for a specific system"). To interpret such negative unity as evidence of dynastic restoration is a form of retrospective imposition rather than grounded inference.

The capacity to impose meanings is unevenly distributed. Among diaspora opposition actors, pro-Pahlavi Persian-language media outlets often possess greater financial resources, reach, and organizational infrastructure than other currents. This structural asymmetry matters because it creates a gap between voice and accountability: those with the greatest ability to narrate events are not those bearing the immediate costs of repression. Under such conditions, the monopolization of protest meaning becomes feasible even when social roots inside Iran are limited or uneven.

This brings a central normative and political question: if a political current seeks to silence alternative voices and impose narrative discipline before acquiring power, on what basis can it claim democratic credibility after acquiring power? Practices of representation are not neutral. They prefigure institutional and political relations by establishing who can speak, whose suffering counts, and which demands are "realistic" or "divisive". If a movement's plurality is treated as a problem to be eliminated rather than a condition to be negotiated, the resulting political horizon is likely to reproduce authoritarian forms even under anti-authoritarian rhetoric.

Internet shutdowns further sharpen this problem. When the state restricts communication to prevent coordination and to obscure repression, the integrity of protest representation becomes even more politically consequential. Under these conditions, external appropriation does not merely misdescribe reality; it may contribute to fragmentation and polarization by substituting media-centered leadership claims for movement-centered coalition building.

Breaking the Cycle of Authoritarianism

Over the past century, Iran has repeatedly experienced the consolidation of power through centralization and coercion. Reza Shah constructed an authoritarian state grounded in a Persian-centric national identity, supplemented by Shi'i elements at a secondary level. After 1979, the monarchy was replaced not by a pluralist democratic order but by a new authoritarian formation organized around ethno-clerical sovereignty and the security state. The revolution removed one regime form, but it did not dismantle the authoritarian logic of rule.

In the early revolutionary period, Khomeini mobilised diverse constituencies, including segments of the left, through anti-Western rhetoric that obscured the authoritarian consolidation underway. Some interpreted the new regime as anti-imperialist, a reading later criticised by Fred Halliday as "the anti-imperialism of fools"[12] highlighting how anti-Western discourse can function as a shield for domestic authoritarian consolidation. Kurdistan's boycott of the constitutional referendum is also highlighted as an early recognition of the new state's exclusionary and anti-democratic structure, particularly its disregard for Kurdish demands and self-determination. Since then, Kurdistan has remained among the most persistent sites of resistance against the Islamic Republic.

[12] https://jacobin.com/2022/12/iran-protest-revolution-history-anti-imperialism-islamic-republic

The contemporary danger lies in the repetition of a familiar pattern under new conditions: the emergence of a figure who, supported by powerful media networks, seeks to capitalize on despair and nostalgia by presenting himself as the singular solution to systemic crisis. While Reza Pahlavi does not possess the organizational depth or revolutionary authority that Khomeini held in 1979, the structural risk is comparable: the reassertion of personalized sovereignty through the replacement of one "master" with another. This dynamic recalls Jacques Lacan's intervention during his 1969 exchange with students at Vincennes, where he warned that revolutionary aspirations often remain bound to existing structures of authority. As Lacan observed, "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one"[13]. His critique was not a rejection of revolutionary desire itself, but an acknowledgement of how deeply social and political life is shaped by entrenched discourses of authority. For Lacan, genuine transformation requires not the substitution of leaders, but the creative subversion of the symbolic and institutional forms that reproduce domination. Viewed in this way, the present moment points less to a struggle over leadership than to an unresolved problem of political form: a politics organized around paternal authority and symbolic inheritance, in which democratic institutionalization, plural representation, collective rights, decentralized governance, and the right to collective self-determination are systematically suppressed.

Breaking Iran's cycle of authoritarianism therefore requires more than regime change. It requires dismantling the political logic that repeatedly converts moments of rupture into renewed domination. Historical experience demonstrates that centralization, the erosion of democratic principles, and the suppression of self-determination consistently reproduce authoritarian governance, even when justified in the name of unity or stability. In this sense, authoritarianism is not merely a characteristic of rulers, but a recurring outcome of political arrangements that treat plurality as a threat and difference as disorder.

If the current protest cycle is to open a path beyond the century-long oscillation between crown and turban, it must give rise to a political project structurally committed to democratic pluralism, decentralization, and the recognition of Iran's ethno-national diversity. Otherwise, the risk is not only the persistence of authoritarianism, but its return in a new language, with familiar hierarchies reconstructed under the banner of "saving the nation".

[13] https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/theforum/beyond-protest/#:~:text=Lacan%20famously%20addressed%20a%20group,You%20will%20get%20one'.