RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Erosion of Consent: Protests and State Violence in Iran

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Abstract

This article examines the rapid erosion of political consent in the Islamic Republic of Iran through an analysis of protest cycles from 1999 to the nationwide uprising that began in December 2025. Drawing on human rights documentation and independent reporting, the paper argues that recurring protest movements have evolved from isolated episodes of dissent into increasingly broad challenges to state legitimacy. Early student protests in 1999 marked a generational rupture from post-revolutionary political cohesion. The 2009 Green Movement deepened critiques of electoral governance, and economic protest waves in 2017 and 2019 expanded dissent into working-class and provincial constituencies. The *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests of 2022 introduced a moral and ideological challenge to state authority, particularly through the central role of women and diverse social groups. The latest protests, sparked by acute economic decline in late 2025, quickly became the largest nationwide mobilization since 1979, encompassing a widening social base and intensifying demands for systemic change. In response, the Iranian state has increasingly relied on lethal repression and coercive governance strategies. Verified reports document mass unlawful killings by security forces during early January 2026, extensive arbitrary arrests, and a near-total internet blackout imposed to conceal the scale of violence and limit independent monitoring. The United Nations Human Rights Council condemned these abuses and extended investigative mandates, highlighting the international concern over the state's use of force. The cumulative evidence suggests that the Islamic Republic's authority is sustained less by popular consent than by coercion, with profound implications for legitimacy, state–society relations, and the prospects for political transformation in Iran.

Keywords: Iran, Protest Movements, Political Legitimacy, State Violence, Erosion of Consent.

1. Introduction

In late December 2025, widespread protests erupted across Iran in response to a sharp deterioration in economic conditions, including severe inflation, the collapse of the national currency, and chronic mismanagement of essential services, and then expanded into mass demonstrations against the political system. [1] The initial strikes by shopkeepers in Tehran rapidly spread to other cities and provinces as protesters voiced broader demands for fundamental political and economic change. Independent human rights organizations and eyewitness accounts documented a sustained, sometimes deadly, nationwide crackdown by Iranian security forces that included live ammunition, fatal shootings of unarmed demonstrators, a near total internet shutdown, and large-scale arbitrary arrests, with reported deaths ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands and thousands more detained. [2] Such violence occurred even as communications blackouts were imposed to conceal the full extent of the repression, raising urgent questions about the evolving relationship between the Iranian state and the society it governs, and suggesting that the use of lethal force against civilian dissent may reflect a deeper crisis of political consent.

Political sociology has long distinguished between authority sustained through consent and authority sustained through coercion. Classical theories

of political legitimacy emphasize that durable governance relies not only on the capacity to enforce obedience but also on public belief in the moral and political validity of state authority. [2] When citizens perceive governing institutions as legitimate, compliance often occurs voluntarily through shared ideological, religious, or institutional commitments. [3] By contrast, regimes that increasingly rely on surveillance, intimidation, or violence to secure compliance may preserve order in the short term but risk weakening the social foundations that sustain long term stability. [4] In this context, recurring protest movements such as those occurring repeatedly in Iran often function as critical indicators of legitimacy crises. They reveal fractures in the relationship between governing institutions and the populations they seek to control. [5] Examining protest cycles, therefore, provides a valuable lens through which to analyze not only moments of political unrest but also broader transformations in how authority is constructed, challenged, and maintained.

2. Legitimacy and Political Consent in Iran

The political authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded upon a combination of revolutionary ideology, religious authority, and anti-imperial nationalism that generated broad popular mobilization during and immediately following the 1979 revolution.[6] The overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy was framed not only as a political transition but as a moral and religious transformation intended to restore justice, independence, and social equity. [6] Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's leadership embodied a form of charismatic religious authority that fused Shi'a theological legitimacy with revolutionary political messaging, creating a governing framework that emphasized both divine sanction and popular participation. The establishment of institutions such as the Basij (Iran's volunteer army motivated by ideological, religious, and political loyalty), and the expansion of mosque-based political networks, reinforced this legitimacy by integrating ideological mobilization with local governance structures. This enabled the new regime to cultivate voluntary compliance among large segments of the population. [9] During its early decades, the Islamic Republic therefore relied heavily on ideological and religious legitimacy to sustain authority, presenting itself as a state that reflected the moral will of the people rather than merely exercising coercive control.

The durability of this legitimacy was further strengthened by the regime's ability to present itself as the defender of Iranian sovereignty against foreign intervention, particularly during the Iran Iraq War, which became a defining moment of national unity and revolutionary consolidation. [10] The wartime mobilization of civilians and religious volunteers reinforced narratives of sacrifice, resistance, and collective religious duty that linked state authority to national survival. In this context, political dissent could be portrayed as both a moral and national betrayal, further reinforcing voluntary compliance and social cohesion. [11] Yet the legitimacy constructed through revolutionary charisma, wartime mobilization, and ideological governance depended heavily on sustained public belief in the regime's moral authority and its capacity to deliver social justice and economic stability. Over time, as demographic shifts, economic pressures, and generational change altered public expectations, these foundations of legitimacy began to face increasing strain.

3. Protest Cycles and the Erosion of Consent

Since the early decades of the Islamic Republic, recurring protest movements have emerged as one of the most visible indicators of shifting public attitudes toward state authority. While the Iranian political system has long experienced periodic dissent, the scale, geographic spread, and social composition of protest waves over the past three decades suggest a gradual but persistent weakening of political consent. Rather than representing isolated eruptions of dissatisfaction, successive protest cycles have reflected changing expectations among Iranian citizens regarding governance, economic opportunity, social freedoms, and political representation. Each wave has introduced new constituencies into public dissent, expanding protest participation beyond reformist political activists to include students, working class populations, women, and ethnically marginalized communities. This cumulative expansion of protest participation has gradually transformed dissent from demands for policy reform into broader challenges to the legitimacy of governing institutions. [5]

3.1 Student Protests of 1999

One of the earliest major signals of emerging legitimacy strain appeared during the 1999 student protests, which were triggered by the closure of reformist newspapers and broader restrictions on political expression. Although initially centered

within university communities, the protests reflected growing frustration among younger generations who had not directly experienced the revolutionary mobilization or wartime solidarity that had shaped earlier public support for the regime. [6]The state's violent suppression of student demonstrations signaled the limits of political reform and introduced a pattern in which protest movements were increasingly met with coercive force rather than institutional accommodation. [6] The events of 1999 therefore marked an early turning point in which generational expectations began to diverge from the ideological foundations that had previously sustained regime legitimacy.

3.2 Green Movement

The 2009 Green Movement represented a significantly broader challenge to the government's legitimacy, as millions of Iranians mobilized following disputed presidential election results. Unlike earlier protests that centered primarily on social or media restrictions, the Green Movement directly questioned the integrity of electoral institutions and the authenticity of popular representation within the Islamic Republic. Protesters framed their demands through the language of political rights, electoral accountability, and constitutional governance, signaling a shift toward more systemic critiques of authority. [14] The state's subsequent crackdown, which included mass arrests, public trials, and lethal force against demonstrators, reinforced perceptions among many Iranians that formal political participation channels were increasingly constrained, further eroding confidence in institutional legitimacy. [9]

3.3 Economic Protests of 2017 and 2019

Beginning in 2017 and intensifying in 2019, protest movements increasingly centered on economic grievances, including unemployment, inflation, corruption, and declining living standards. These demonstrations marked an important transformation in the social composition of dissent, as protests spread into working class communities and provincial cities that had historically been viewed as more politically conservative or supportive of the regime. The emergence of economic protest movements suggested that dissatisfaction had expanded beyond political reform debates to encompass broader concerns regarding governance capacity and distributive justice. [10] The state's violent response to these protests, including widespread shootings and mass detentions, further reinforced the perception that

dissent was being managed through coercion rather than institutional responsiveness. [12]

3.4 Moral, Social and Religious Protests

The protest wave that emerged following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 introduced a new dimension to public dissent by directly challenging the moral authority of the state and its enforcement of social and religious norms. Women played a central symbolic and organizational role in these protests, which rapidly expanded into nationwide demonstrations involving diverse social groups and generational cohorts. [12] Unlike earlier protest cycles that often focused on economic or electoral grievances, these demonstrations questioned the ideological and moral legitimacy of state authority itself. [12] The persistence of protests despite severe repression suggested that dissent had moved beyond reform-oriented demands toward broader rejection of governance practices perceived as intrusive, discriminatory, and unresponsive to societal change.

3.5 Legitimacy Erosion

Taken together, these protest cycles reveal a pattern of cumulative legitimacy erosion in which dissent has broadened across social, economic, and ideological dimensions. Each successive wave has expanded the scope of grievances, while at the same time narrowing the space for institutional accommodation. As protest participation has widened, state responses have increasingly relied on coercive suppression, contributing to a feedback dynamic in which repression intensifies public mistrust while failing to eliminate dissent. Examining these cycles collectively therefore suggests that contemporary protest movements in Iran reflect not temporary unrest but an evolving transformation in the relationship between state authority and political consent.

4. Social Expansion of Dissent

While the initial triggers of the 2025–26 protests were deeply rooted in economic distress, the wave of dissent quickly expanded to include a remarkably broad array of social groups throughout Iranian society. What began with strikes and closures by shopkeepers in Tehran's Grand Bazaar spread within days to students in major universities and then to protests in towns and smaller cities nationwide, illustrating a diffusion of political engagement beyond traditional activist circles. [13] [15]

Analysts and research briefings note that universities, bazaars, and urban centers became key centers of

mobilization, underscoring how students, professionals, small traders, and youth converged around shared grievances against economic mismanagement and political exclusion. These dynamics reflect broader patterns in modern Iranian protest movements, where localized or sector-specific disputes can cascade into more comprehensive expressions of social discontent.

Beyond internal Iranian society, the protests also reverberated within the Iranian diaspora, illustrating a transnational dimension of social expansion. Iranian communities in cities across Europe, North America, and Oceania organized solidarity rallies that drew thousands of participants and demonstrated solidarity with demonstrators back home. [22] These diaspora mobilizations reveal how a widening public sphere and transnational communication have expanded the contours of dissent beyond Iran's borders.

The involvement of diverse religious and ethnic groups further emphasizes the breadth of participation. Independent reporting indicates that Christians and other religious minorities, [16] in addition to majority Shia and minority Muslim populations, participated in anti-government demonstrations and faced arrests or violence by security forces, [16] underscoring the cross-communal appeal of protest demands that transcend economic grievances to encompass broader questions of governance and civil rights. [17]

This expansion of participation across socioeconomic, regional, generational, and diasporic lines not only demonstrates the *scale* of the 2025–26 protests but also signals an erosion of barriers between previously segmented social constituencies. By involving students, merchants, minorities, expatriates, and others, this cycle of dissent has widened the social base of challenges to the state's legitimacy and elevated political contestation from episodic unrest to an expression of deeper systemic frustration.

5. State Violence as Governance Strategy

The response of the Iranian state to protest mobilization in 2025–26 reflects a deliberate strategic shift toward lethal repression and broad coercive control rather than institutional accommodation. What began as economic demonstrations sparked by the collapse of the rial on 28 December 2025 quickly escalated into nationwide calls for political change, drawing participation across cities and social strata. In response, Iranian security forces—including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Basij militia, and FARAJA police units—used unlawful and often lethal force against demonstrators in multiple provinces. These actions included live ammunition, coordinated mass shootings, and extensive arrests, culminating in some of the gravest violations of human rights in the country in decades. [14]

Reports from human rights organizations show that the deadliest phases of the crackdown occurred on 8 and 9 January 2026, when security forces engaged in widespread massacres of protesters, even as authorities imposed a near-total internet blackout to restrict independent reporting of the violence. The blackout, which began as communications were cut nationwide on 8 January, reduced information flow and made verification of casualties difficult, contributing to large discrepancies between official and independent death estimates. [17]

The scale of violence has drawn international condemnation. On 23 January 2026, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution condemning the killing of thousands of protesters and calling for investigations into human rights violations, including the use of excessive and lethal force and the enforced internet shutdown. The resolution noted that prolonged communication restrictions were a violation of international human rights law and hindered accountability. [20]

This pattern of violence is part of a broader coercive governance strategy by Iran's leadership. By mobilizing not only formal security forces, but also plain-clothes agents and intelligence operatives, the state has sought to suppress dissent preemptively and deter future mobilization through fear, mass detention, and judicial persecution. Observers have documented charges against protest participants that carry potential death sentences under broad interpretations of national security law, further illustrating how state power has been wielded to criminalize dissent as a way of preserving authority. [21]

Taken together, these developments indicate a structural shift in how the Islamic Republic manages political unrest. Whereas earlier protest waves were met with mixed responses that included limited negotiations or partial concessions, the 2025–26 crackdown represents a strategy that privileges coercion and lethal suppression over legitimacy-based governance. In doing so, the state has highlighted its willingness to use violence as a central mechanism of political control, even at the cost of significant loss of life and international censure.

6. Conclusion

Across successive waves of protest in Iran, from the student demonstrations of 1999 to the nationwide unrest beginning in December 2025, a clear pattern has emerged: the Iranian state's maintenance of political order has increasingly relied not on legitimacy grounded in public consent, but on coercion and repression. What began in December 2025 as socio-economic protest against a collapsing currency and deteriorating living conditions quickly morphed into a broader political challenge to governing authority, drawing participation from diverse social strata, including students, women, religious minorities, and working-class communities. This expansion reflects not temporary unrest, but a deepening crisis of consent that cuts across social, ideological, and generational lines.

Rather than responding with inclusive political reform or institutional accommodation, the state's response to this crisis has been to intensify the role of coercive institutions including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Basij militia, and national security apparatus, and to embed repression at the core of governance strategy. The crackdown that reached its deadliest phase on 8 and 9 January 2026 has been described by human rights organizations as one of the most severe in modern Iranian history, with security forces employing live ammunition against demonstrators and imposing near-total internet shutdowns to conceal the scale of violence.

The international community has recognized the significance of these developments. On 23 January 2026, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution condemning the killings of thousands of protesters and extending the mandate of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Iran to investigate recent and ongoing human rights abuses. The resolution explicitly noted widespread arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, and prolonged communication blackouts as violations of international human rights law, underscoring the severity of the state's coercive strategy.

The shift toward governance without consent has profound implications for both domestic politics and the future of the Iranian state. As protest demands have moved from economic reforms toward systemic critique of authority and broader calls for political transformation, the state's retreat into coercive governance has exacerbated social mistrust, weakened institutional legitimacy, and closed off channels for peaceful political cooperation. In doing so, the Islamic Republic risks becoming increasingly isolated from the very society it claims to represent, a dynamic that has significant consequences for social stability, state legitimacy, and the possibility of peaceful political evolution.

Ultimately, the 2025–26 protests and the state's response reveal a political order that is sustained less by consent than by force. The ethical and political costs of governance without consent are considerable: human rights violations, widespread loss of life, and long-term damage to the social contract between state and society. Recognizing the structural nature of this shift and its roots in the erosion of legitimacy over decades is essential for any understanding of the current crisis and for imagining political futures that move beyond coercion toward genuine political participation and accountability.

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