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The Elusive Quest for Freedom in Iran: A Historical and Structural Analysis of Failed Democratic Movements

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Abstract

Iran's modern history is marked by repeated popular uprisings demanding freedom, justice, and democratic governance. Despite significant moments of mobilization from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022, the Iranian people have consistently failed to institutionalize lasting democratic freedoms. This article examines the structural, historical, and geopolitical reasons behind this recurring failure. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, it argues that top-down modernization without societal modernity, foreign interference, the absence of cohesive leadership, economic fragmentation, and international ambivalence have collectively undermined Iran's democratic potential. The paper concludes that while the Iranian state remains resilient through repression and external alliances, the persistent accumulation of popular grievances suggests that the struggle for freedom is far from over.

Keywords: Iran, democracy, authoritarianism, social movements, "Woman, Life, Freedom", foreign intervention, modernization

1. Introduction

Iran stands at a paradoxical crossroads in the 21st century: a nation with a rich civilizational heritage, a young and educated populace, and a long history of resistance against autocracy—yet one that remains entrenched in authoritarian rule. Over the past century, Iranians have risen repeatedly against tyranny, from the Constitutional Movement of the early 20th century to the Green Movement of 2009 and the nationwide protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022. Yet each wave of protest has been met with brutal repression, internal fragmentation, or geopolitical indifference, preventing the consolidation of democratic gains.

This article seeks to analyze why Iranians have consistently failed to achieve sustainable freedom. It does so by tracing the historical trajectory of Iran's democratic struggles, identifying recurring patterns of failure, and examining the interplay between domestic structures and international dynamics. The central thesis is that Iran's failure to democratize stems not from a cultural aversion to freedom, but from a confluence of authoritarian state-building, externally imposed constraints, and the absence of inclusive, organized civil resistance capable of translating popular anger into institutional change.

Methodology

This study employs a historical-structural analysis grounded in critical political theory and comparative historical sociology to examine the recurring failure of democratic movements in Iran. The research design integrates process tracing and thematic content analysis to identify causal mechanisms and structural constraints that have consistently undermined popular demands for freedom across distinct historical junctures—from the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising (2022–2023).

Primary data are drawn from archival records, protest slogans, government statements, and human rights documentation (e.g., HRANA, Amnesty International). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarly works, policy reports, and media analyses from reputable outlets (e.g., *Foreign Policy*, *Vox*, *Radio Free Europe*). Particular attention is paid to Moossavi's (n.d.) original synthesis of Iran's political trajectory, which serves as the conceptual backbone of this article.

The analytical framework is informed by three interrelated theoretical lenses:

1. State Formation Theory (Tilly, 1975; Migdal, 1988): This perspective elucidates how authoritarian state-building in Iran—under both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic—prioritized coercive capacity and external legitimacy over societal consent and institutional pluralism.

2. Modernization vs. Modernity (Eisenstadt, 1973; Bayat, 2007): The study distinguishes between superficial institutional modernization (e.g., infrastructure, education) and the deeper cultural and cognitive shifts associated with modernity (e.g., individual rights, secular rationality). Iran's elite-driven modernization without societal modernity created a persistent legitimacy deficit.

3. Transnational Repression and Geopolitical Containment (Heydemann & Leenders, 2013; Saleh & Hashemi, 2023): The role of external actors—particularly Western powers, Russia, and China—is analyzed not as mere interference but as structural enablers of authoritarian resilience through strategic silence, economic dependency, and diplomatic shielding.

The temporal scope spans over a century of Iranian political history, segmented into six critical episodes: (1) the Constitutional Movement, (2) Reza Shah's dictatorship, (3) the Mossadegh interlude and 1953 coup, (4) the White Revolution and 1979 Revolution, (5) post-revolutionary resistance (1999–2019), and (6) the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Each episode is examined for patterns of mobilization, state response, international reaction, and movement outcomes.

Limitations include the partial availability of verified casualty and arrest figures due to state censorship, as well as the evolving nature of the 2022–2023 protests, which remain subject to ongoing documentation. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple sources enhances the reliability of findings.

This methodology enables a nuanced understanding of why Iranian democratic aspirations repeatedly collapse—not due to cultural fatalism or public apathy, but because of intersecting domestic authoritarian strategies and international power dynamics that systematically disadvantage grassroots transformation.

The Constitutional Movement (1905–1911): The First Democratic Experiment

The Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) marked the first major attempt to limit monarchical absolutism and establish representative governance. Sparked by widespread discontent over foreign concessions, economic mismanagement, and clerical-state collusion, the movement succeeded in forcing Muzaffar al-Din Shah to issue a constitutional decree in 1906 and establish the National Consultative

Assembly (Majles)—making Iran the first country in Asia to adopt a parliamentary system (Abrahamian, 1982).

The revolution yielded significant achievements: the founding of political parties, independent newspapers, and modern educational institutions. However, its democratic promise was short-lived. Internal divisions among liberals, clerics, and merchants, coupled with external sabotage by imperial powers—particularly Britain and Russia—undermined its viability. Russian forces bombarded the Majles in 1908, and foreign-backed coups destabilized the nascent government (Kojaro, n.d.). By 1911, the movement had collapsed under the weight of famine, disease, and geopolitical interference.

This early failure established a pattern: democratic openings in Iran are vulnerable not only to internal fragmentation but also to external actors who prioritize strategic interests over democratic values.

The Pahlavi Era: Modernization Without Modernity

Reza Shah Pahlavi's rise to power in 1925 marked a decisive shift from constitutionalism to authoritarian modernization. With British support, Reza Khan (later Reza Shah) overthrew the Qajar dynasty and established the Pahlavi monarchy. His regime prioritized state-building creating a centralized army, secular education system, and infrastructure but suppressed all forms of political dissent (Atlantic Council, 2021).

Crucially, Reza Shah pursued *modernization*—the adoption of Western institutions and technologies—without fostering *modernity*, defined as the internalization of democratic values, individual rights, and civic participation among the populace. Political parties, free press, and civil society were banned. Loyalty to the nation-state was enforced, but not through consent, rather through coercion (Moossavi, n.d.).

This top-down transformation created a disjuncture between state and society. While urban elites benefited from modern institutions, the rural majority remained alienated. The absence of political pluralism meant that when Reza Shah was exiled by Allied forces in 1941 during World War II, Iran lacked the civic infrastructure to sustain democratic governance.

The Mossadegh Interlude and the 1953 Coup

The brief premiership of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh (1951–1953) represented Iran's most promising democratic experiment. A secular nationalist, Mossadegh nationalized Iran's oil industry previously controlled by the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company—and championed civil liberties, women's suffrage, and parliamentary sovereignty (Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.).

His government enjoyed broad popular support and inspired anti-colonial movements across the Global South. However, Britain and the United States viewed Mossadegh's policies as a threat to Western interests and a potential opening for Soviet influence. In 1953, the CIA and MI6 orchestrated a coup (Operation Ajax) that overthrew Mossadegh and reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah as an absolute monarch (Abrahamian, 1982).

The coup had profound consequences. It not only ended Iran's democratic experiment but also delegitimized secular nationalism in the eyes of many Iranians, who came to associate it with foreign manipulation. The Shah's subsequent dictatorship (1953–1979) relied heavily on U.S. backing and the secret police (SAVAK), further entrenching authoritarianism.

The White Revolution and the Rise of Political Islam

In 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah launched the "White Revolution" a series of aggressive modernization reforms including land redistribution, women's suffrage, and literacy campaigns. While economically

transformative, these reforms disrupted traditional social structures without creating inclusive political channels (Britannica, n.d.).

The clergy, particularly Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, opposed the secularizing thrust of the reforms. Khomeini framed his resistance in religious and anti-imperialist terms, gaining support from bazaar merchants, students, and the urban poor. Simultaneously, leftist and socialist groups launched armed resistance, fearing Iran might fall to communism a scenario that alarmed Western powers (Chalcraft, 2016).

Ironically, Western governments, particularly the U.S. and France, facilitated Khomeini's rise by providing him asylum and media platforms. They saw a theocratic regime as a bulwark against Soviet influence. When the 1979 Revolution erupted, the U.S. ensured the Iranian military remained neutral, effectively enabling Khomeini's takeover (Moossavi, n.d.).

Thus, the Islamic Republic emerged not as a purely indigenous movement but as a product of both domestic grievances and geopolitical calculation.

The Islamic Republic: A Religious Dictatorship in Republican Form

The 1979 Revolution initially promised justice, freedom, and independence. However, Khomeini quickly consolidated power by eliminating rivals executing thousands of leftists, nationalists, and liberals and establishing a theocratic system under the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist).

Despite holding elections, the Islamic Republic is structurally authoritarian. The Supreme Leader, not elected by the people, controls the judiciary, military, and media. The Guardian Council vets all candidates, ensuring only regime loyalists can run for office. Women, ethnic minorities, and religious dissenters face systemic discrimination.

The regime's legitimacy rests on populist religious rhetoric such as "rule of God" and mandatory hijab rather than democratic consent. By 1979, Iran was 54% literate and 50% rural; the state leveraged this demographic to promote conservative values while suppressing liberal and secular voices (Moossavi, n.d.).

Waves of Resistance: From Kuye Daneshgah to the Green Movement

Resistance to the Islamic Republic has been persistent but fragmented.

The 1999 student protests (Kuye Daneshgah) erupted after the closure of a reformist newspaper and exposed deep generational divides. Students chanted, "Khamenei! Shame on You, Leadership is NOT for You," but the movement lacked broad public support and organizational structure (RFE/RL, n.d.).

A decade later, the 2009 Green Movement emerged in response to the fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Millions took to the streets supporting Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a reformist candidate who promised to reduce the Supreme Leader's power. The movement was largely nonviolent and urban-based, with slogans like "Where is my vote?" and "Obama, either with them or with us" (Vox, 2022).

However, the Green Movement failed for several reasons:

- Lack of international support: The Obama administration prioritized nuclear diplomacy over backing protesters.
- Repression: Over 366 people were killed, and Mousavi, his wife Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi remain under house arrest without trial (Amnesty International, cited in Moossavi).
- Absence of labor or rural participation: The movement remained confined to the middle class.

These failures reinforced the regime's belief that it could crush dissent through violence and isolation.

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement (2022–2023)

The death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman arrested by Iran's "morality police" for allegedly improper hijab ignited the most widespread and radical protest movement in Iran's history. Beginning in September 2022, demonstrations spread to 134 cities, involving women, youth, ethnic minorities, university students, and even schoolgirls (HRANA, 2023).

Unlike previous movements, "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi) was leaderless, decentralized, and explicitly anti-systemic. Slogans such as "Death to the Dictator" and "We don't want the Islamic Republic" signaled a rejection of the entire regime, not just its policies. The movement drew on Kurdish feminist philosophy, particularly Abdullah Öcalan's assertion that "a country can't be free unless women are free" (Dilar, 2022).

Key features included:

- Gender centrality: Women removed their hijabs publicly, symbolizing resistance to state-imposed morality.
- Ethnic inclusivity: Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Azeris participated, highlighting the regime's marginalization of minorities.
- Youth mobilization: Teenagers and university students formed the backbone, using social media to evade censorship.

Despite its strength, the movement faced severe repression. As of January 2023, over 19,000 were arrested and at least 500 killed (HRANA, 2023). Suspected poisonings of schoolgirls and university students further terrorized dissenters (NBC News, 2023).

Structural and External Barriers to Democratic Success

1. Lack of Economic Leverage in Protests

A critical weakness of recent movements, including "Woman, Life, Freedom," is the absence of coordinated labor strikes. While workers in oil, transport, and manufacturing have staged isolated protests (Foreign Policy, 2022), they have not joined the broader movement en masse. Without economic disruption, the regime retains fiscal and operational stability.

2. International Ambivalence

Western powers have consistently failed to provide meaningful support. Reasons include:

- Geopolitical pragmatism: Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen makes Western states reluctant to destabilize the region (Moossavi, n.d.).
- Energy dependence: The Ukraine war increased Europe's need for alternative energy sources, reducing pressure on Iran (Washington Post, 2022).
- UN vetoes: China and Russia shield Iran in international forums, providing surveillance technology and tactical advice on repression (Moossavi, n.d.).

3. Leaderless Structure: Strength or Weakness?
The absence of formal leadership protects the movement from decapitation but hinders strategic coordination and negotiation. Unlike the Green Movement, which had identifiable leaders (however compromised), "Woman, Life, Freedom" operates as a rhizomatic network—resilient but directionless.

4. State Resilience Through Repression and Ideology
The Islamic Republic has survived by:

- Expanding its security apparatus (Basij, IRGC).
- Controlling education and media.
- Exploiting sectarian and ethnic divisions.
- Promoting revolutionary ideology among loyalist segments.

Why Movements Stagnate: A Synthesis
The temporary stagnation of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement can be attributed to:

- Unrealistic goals without social infrastructure: Demanding regime collapse without organized civil or military support is unsustainable.
- Government targeting of youth: Arrests, school poisonings, and university crackdowns demoralize the core demographic.
- Media shift to Ukraine: Global attention diverted from Iran in late 2022.
- Lack of worker solidarity: Economic grievances remain disconnected from political demands.
- Western prioritization of nuclear talks: The Biden administration sought détente, not regime change.

Future Prospects: Seeds of Transformation
Despite setbacks, the movement has achieved significant shifts:

- The regime is on the defensive, reversing some social policies (e.g., relaxing hijab enforcement in certain areas).
- Clerical authority is weakening, especially among the youth.
- Universities and labor groups are increasingly vocal.
- Exiled and domestic opposition factions are finding common ground.

As Moossavi (n.d.) notes, "This movement has brought together Iranian political groups and factions with different tendencies and created new political fronts." While immediate revolution is unlikely, the cumulative effect of decades of resistance may yet produce a critical rupture.

Conclusion
Iran's failure to achieve freedom is not due to a lack of desire among its people, but to a complex interplay of historical trauma, authoritarian resilience, and international complicity. From the Constitutional Revolution to "Woman, Life, Freedom," Iranians have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to liberty. Yet each movement has been derailed by internal disunity, external sabotage, or the absence of economic and institutional leverage.
For democracy to succeed in Iran, future movements must bridge the gap between moral outrage and strategic organization. International actors, meanwhile, must move beyond transactional diplomacy and support Iranian civil society consistently—not just when it aligns with short-term interests. Until then, the dream of a free Iran remains deferred, but not extinguished.

Authors' Biography

As a highly motivated, consistent, and open-minded student of Master's Degree of International Relations, I seek a career in which I can not only be able to use my knowledge about the world, politics, and societies, but also expand it. By living in different countries, I learned how to interact with different people from different backgrounds and work in stressful and time-pressuring conditions. As an empathic altruistic person, I want to show the truth and reality about every situation happening.

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