**Transcript**

**Emmanuel Kattan, Host**: On September 16, a young Iranian woman of Kurdish origin, Mahsa Amini, died after being arrested by Iran's Guidance Patrol, the "morality police," for wearing her hijab too loosely. According to eyewitnesses, Amini's death was the result of police brutality. It triggered a wave of protests that have been gaining in intensity and spreading throughout the country over the last four weeks. A unique feature of these protests is that they have been led and inspired by women. How does this new uprising relate to previous protests in Iran over the last decades? Are they likely to shake the foundations of the mullahs' regime in Iran? What are the possible outcomes of these demonstrations? In order to analyze the significance of this uprising in the historical and social context of Iran, Vis a Vis invited Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh, fellow of the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University.

Dr. Tajbakhsh is an international expert in the areas of local government reform, urban planning, civil society capacity building, and international public policy research collaboration. Dr. Tajbakhsh was a representative of the Open Society Foundations in Iran in the early 2000s, and was one of the Iranian-American dual citizens arrested and detained for years in Iran after being falsely accused of engaging in activities against Iranian national security. Dr. Tajbakhsh is the author of *The Promise of the City: Space, Density and Politics in Contemporary Social Thought*, published by the University of California Press in 2001. And his latest book, *Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization*, was published by Cambridge University Press in July 2022. And his latest article in *Public Seminar* entitled “Iran’s First Feminist Uprising” was translated in five languages. Dr. Tajbakhsh, welcome to Vis a Vis.

Young women and men who are demonstrating in the streets of Tehran and 80 other cities in Iran represent a new generation of protesters. They've only known the current regime. Their slogan, "woman, life, freedom" seems to be as much an act of defiance against the government as it is also an act of hope. But Iran has been through many waves of protests and demonstrations in the last decades. We've seen demonstrations in 2009, 2017, and more recently, 2019. All have been crushed. Is this wave of demonstrations different?

**Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh, Guest**: Well, Emmanuel, thank you very much for inviting me to share my thoughts about the current events in Iran. In response to your first question, I would say, yes, there is something very unprecedented and new about these current protests. This is really the first time we've had a society-wide and very broadly supported uprising against a particular type of traditionalist and puritanical norms that are imposed by the Iranian government as part of the Islamic government's fundamental laws. And so this kind of demand we haven't really seen at this level of depth and breadth before, even though it is the case that women have been resisting and struggling for their rights in a, let us say, tacit, informal way for four decades of the, under the Islamic Republic.

The fact remains that the current tragic death of Mahsa Amini has triggered a really unprecedented level of protest against what I called in my recent essay, the “patriarchal control of women's bodies," but also the what I also call the "paternalistic control of public space": the streets, the schools, the parties that young people want to go to, the cafes, the restaurants. All these are strictly controlled by the Iranian regime so that they can conform with the government's interpretation of what is proper Islamic morality and public behavior. And so this is really, so there is something new about it.

**Kattan**: And this alienation, do you feel that it is also emphasized by relationship with the outside world, and particularly through social media, but also through travel, that, that Iranians have been going back and forth, in, in Europe and the United States, connections with families who are exiled? I heard some commentators, for example, who claim that Western influence the fact of that, you know, the population in a country like Iran is being exposed through social media, the movies, etc., to Western values, that that has played an important role in forging the imagination of this new generation of young people who have known only the regime of the, of the mullahs. And, and do you think that, that that is the case?

Or is there also internal conversations that are happening among these young people that are not necessarily indebted to the values of, the so-called "values of the West" that they might see on their television or, or telephone screens, but that there are in internal discussions about the values that they want to espouse and develop, and, and perhaps also their own version of feminism that they might be developing?

**Tajbakhsh**: Yes. I mean, I think that well, we have to be careful here. I mean, first of all, the current regime in Iran has accused the current protests of being somehow either overly influenced, or even instigated, by Western powers. But what they really mean, and this is a long-standing belief of the regime, is that the, that the Western culture has influenced the populations in Iran, different groups of the population, in ways which they feel are contradictory to their understanding of Islamic norms. We have to be careful in not endorsing, or let us say, repeating the accusations, which, which don't seem to be borne out. It is Western influence, but only in the broadest sense of the term "West." I mean, what we really are talking about is a young generation that is influenced by a global culture of modernity. It's not that it's coming from the United States or Europe.

And here, I think I, you know, I want to make a point, which I, you know, following up on your first question about the kinds of demands that are being made. It did begin with an anti-hijab, an anti-mandatory-veiling protest. So in one sense, it is a, it is a generational clash between a young generation that feels alienated from the ideals of the revolution, and from their grandparents really, I mean, you know, from the older generations that are still in charge. As the demands expanded and has expanded over the last month of protests, it also includes anti-authoritarian demands, that is to say, demands for more accountable government, and for more personal and political freedoms. There are also — more muted, but there are also economic demands, which echoes some of the earlier protests.

But I think that fundamentally, we're seeing a kind of Iranian version of a culture clash. In other words, a contradiction between profoundly different beliefs about the nature of the good life, about the nature of a good society, and the kind of relative balance between individual and collective duties and rights. In terms of the younger people and the other kinds of influence, I should make one point: I should emphasize how utterly an outlier Iran is when it comes to the question of a number of issues, social issues. One of them is this mandatory hijab. Iran is the only country — apart from Afghanistan — on earth that imposes mandatory veiling for all women in all public places. And so it's not only a question of, of influence from the West. Many young people would look around the world and they would see every other Islamic country, other than Afghanistan, does not impose the mandatory veil. And so, you know, it's hard to then say that this is a really a Western influence. This is a culture of modernity that many Islamic countries around the world have adopted: a new appreciation of individual autonomy, a rebalancing between individual autonomy and, you know, communal norms. And so this is something that the young people are tapping into. It's not just Western.

**Kattan**: I want to come back to this point that you were making about the internal divisions within, within Iranian society. And in one of your articles, you establish a very interesting distinction between three groups that are promoting distinct visions of the future of Iran. So first, there are the velayi, the Islamists that rule the country, and their supporters. Second, you have Islamic democratic reformists, who have been marginalized since 2009. And are also marginalized, I understand, in electoral processes. And then third, the modern, "secular modernists," as we may call them, who enjoy tacit support within the country. I'm curious about your sense of which of these groups is likely to prevail today. And if if there is indeed a feminist social movement, that is, you know, managing actually to stir things up and to shake the foundations of the Islamic Republic's regime, what are the groups that you believe are likely to lead any any kind of fight to basically, you know, shake down the regime and create a new future for Iran?

**Tajbakhsh**: Yeah, I mean, this question is interesting. And it speaks to an important point that I'd like to emphasize, too. Is that there is a tendency in the reporting on the protests in Iran to set up a kind of simplistic binary, that what we're seeing is a kind of monolithic society, combating, you know, a, an oppressive regime. Now, Iranians don't speak with a single voice. Iranian society is not monolithic. There are a significant minority of Iranians who support the current regime, and who support mandatory veiling and hijab. We make an estimate of somewhere between 10% and 20% of the population, if we, if we pitch it at, let's say, 15% of the population. It's, Iran is a very large country, more than 80-million-people population. So we're talking about, you know, 8 or 9 million people who, the velayis, which means supporters of the "Velayat-e Faqih" principle of Islamic rule, where "Velayat-e Faqih" is the Persian term for "the Supreme Leader." So, the idea of you have essentially an Islamic form of dictatorship, where the main power centers are not accountable in an electoral sense, is the Velayat-e Faqih principle. So I think that it's important not to misinterpret the protests as representing a single voice of the Iranian population.

So, with that in mind, I make these three distinctions. I mean, my -- leaving aside a group of communist groups, opposition groups outside of Iran who are committed to the violent and armed overthrow of the regime, I'm leaving them aside, because they don't have much support within Iran. I identify three types of agenda, projects, utopian goals, the sort of visions of what Iran should be in the future. And, as you summarized, the one is the fundamentalist Islamist view of a kind of, you know, an Islamic state, an Islamist state. And, you know, that's the current system we have now.

The two other visions are the moderate reformists, and they are Islamic reformists, who are associated with the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, in the 19-- late 1990s. This group is fascinating, because they evolved over a 20-year period, from being very fundamentalist Islamists, to becoming what I call "Muslim democrats." They evolved over time to accept a kind of pluralist democracy. That is to say, they have come to accept that they are only one group among many groups, and even non-Islamic groups -- and in this in this respect, they they echo the, the quite staggering evolution of the Ennahda party in Tunisia, which after 2016, did the same thing. They kind of like, they went beyond the idea of Islamic state, and have accepted to become one amongst many political parties, and to accept electoral loss, and to accept, you know, free and fair elections as the best criteria for assessing the collective will, you know, the general will. So this is a, this is, this is a move towards democracy. I mean, that's the good news. The bad news is, since 2009, and after the crushing of the Green Movement protests, this group has been completely marginalized. Their leaders are either in prison, in exile, or have they been completely silenced and banished from public life. And they don't have, their parties are illegal, they don't have newspapers, they don't have access to media. So that's really a tragic situation about them, because they do represent a, an influential group that probably possesses quite a significant support within the society.

The third group are the secular republicans. And to the extent they, there are secular republicans who live inside Iran, they live a kind of shadow existence, a kind of "don't ask, don't tell." And the reason is, because all secular parties are banned in Iran. There are no secular media that, no newspapers, there is no ability to make a have, you know, to assemble or mobilize or to contest elections. And so they have really no legal existence within Iran. Most of the secular republican platforms that we hear about are from a diasporic and groups of Iranians outside of Iran. They're very influential, through TV and so forth. But those outside sources of media and ideas have limited influence on events inside Iran.

So those are the three, those are the three groups. You ask a very nice question about: what, how could a new social foundation be found for Iran? And my, my view is that it's very, it's probably impossible for any one of these three visions to prevail by means of suppressing the other two. The current velayi vision has prevailed, but only in a oppressive authoritarian way. It has to basically completely marginalize and repress the other alternatives. Coexistence, I think, amongst these three, I see as the path forward for forming a new social foundation for Iran. Along that path towards a fourth vision, it is the case that I think, I mean, I think the secular republicans are probably open to it. And that could come under the guise of a constitutional monarch or, or an anti-monarchist republicanism. Those are the two flavors of the secular republicans. I think the Muslim democrats are, would be open to a more encompassing and inclusive vision. The current rulers in Iran are the ones who will suffer the most -- in other words, will have to step back the most. So in terms of the future, I think that, again, to circle back to the idea of the protests, I think that we should realize that the protests represent a significant part of the population of Iran, but not all of it. And that going forward, I think that a fourth vision that allows a kind of practical compromise between these three groups, is, as I can see it as certainly, maybe not the only way to go, but it's the way I see it going forward.

**Kattan**: That's fascinating. I'd like to end with, with one question that goes back to your expertise, which is really on local governments and civil society in Iran. Many commentators have remarked that, yes, this is a very diverse movement, it is led and inspired by women, but you have young people, you have older people, rich, and, and, and not-so-rich Iranians who are joining these demonstrations around the country, which in a way is also unprecedented. That being said, many recognize that for a rebellion to become a revolution, you need other sectors of society to actually join the fray and be involved. Recently, we've seen that a number of workers have threatened to strike. Maybe that's the beginning of a wider movement. But I'm wondering, what is your assessment of the state of civil society in Iran today? And by that, I mean, the intellectual forces and university and universities, forces at the level of local government of civil society, again, you know, NGOs, trade unions. Have they all been so completely clamped down, that there is really no strength there to provide to the movement that is actually taking place in the streets in Iran?

**Tajbakhsh**: Yeah, I mean, I think this, this speaks to an interesting debate within within observers of auth- of authoritarian states, which is the question of under the rubric of authoritarian resilience, and you know: How is it that authoritarian states managed to keep going, and managed to grow, and manage to maintain power? I think that one of the things that we've come to realize, perhaps too late, is that, you know, there was always this belief in the West, and many of us who were trained in the West and socialized in the West, and, you know, came to study the types of political science that, you know, we learn in liberal elite institutions, the assumption seemed to be that democracies are the only stable form of government. That seems to be our default. And so the question always was, why are authoritarian systems not collapsing?

I think that the last 20, 30 years has given us a more realistic sense that, in fact, it's the democracies, which are the outlier. It's the unusual innovation in human history. And most states throughout human history have been authoritarian. And authoritarian states, we should not assume that authoritarian states are unstable, and that we need to explain the stability. Now, in the late 1990s, the reformists had the idea to employ the expansion of the electoral system in Iran as a way of promoting their agenda of democratization. In other words, up until 1999, the only elections that occurred in Iran were for the national parliament and for a few other somewhat, not relevant or important bodies. I mean, they're important, but they're not influenced deeply by elections.

All of a sudden, overnight in 1999, what I call a "Big Bang reform" happened, and over 1,000 — in over 1,000 cities, and over 35,000 villages, all around this massive country -- you know, it's a country bigger than France and Spain and Italy combined in geographic scope -- all of a sudden, you had electoral, you had elections for local city councils, which had never really existed before. The reformers who were in power at the time, thought, or believed, or hoped, that this massive expansion of the electoral infrastructure would allow greater pluralism to take place, it would allow greater participation, it would allow greater civil society activity, and it would allow greater variety of interests and grievances to be expressed through the local electoral mechanisms. That was their hope.

The bottom line of my book is, after 20 years, their project has failed, and instead, the regime has been extremely successful in incorporating these new institutions into the body, into the governmental and administrative infrastructure of the regime itself. And so in a sense, it has neutralized the, the reformists' attempt to use these new electoral institutions to challenge the theocratic regime. And instead, the regime has succeeded in using these institutions to consolidate their power and their regime. So, I think that is an important indication of the ability of authoritarian states to basically control and contain challenges to their rule, and they do it through institutions. So, people do go and vote, they do interact with their local institutions, but they do it strictly within the parameters that are allowed by the Islamic regime, which are not liberal and are not fully democratic. So I think that in terms of civil society, the regime has done that with many civil society organizations. They are generally neutralized. They're very weak.

In terms of the expansion of the protests, well, you know, I think we're very far from a revolutionary situation. A revolutionary situation would require three major expansions from the current protests. It would need to expand to many more social groups, and generational groups in the urban middle class, the same groups that were out in 2009, during the Green Movement. We haven't seen this yet. The next expansion would have to go towards the industrial sectors of the economy. As you, as you noted, in the last few days, there have been some, some minor incidents of strikes and threats and so forth. Until that goes across on a mass level that would threaten the economy, you know, that would be the failure of the second expansion. And the third expansion would be fissures in the military and security services. And we've seen no sign of that yet. So, you know, I think that the protests will leave a deep legacy, a positive legacy of, of competing visions of the future of Iran, and it'll be the challenge that this government will have to face for years to come.

**Kattan**: Dr. Tajbakhsh, thank you so much for these enlightening comments and this very thought-provoking conversation. I'll remind our listeners that Dr. Tajbakhsh's latest book, Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization, is published by Cambridge University Press, and it was out last summer. Before we close, I'd like to pay homage to Dr. Fariba Adelkhah, professor at Sciences Po in Paris. Dr. Adelkhah, has been arrested by the Iranian authorities in June 2019, and condemned a year later to five years in prison for alleged collusion to undermine national security. Much like you have, Dr., Dr. Tajbakhsh. For 1,000 days, faced with arbitrary imprisonment and with health-threatening living conditions, she has stood her ground with admirable moral strength and dignity.