

ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

Revolutionary Politics of the Normal

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The “longing for a normal life,” (*hasrat-i yik zindigi-yi ma'muli*) as lyricized in what became the Woman, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) movement's favorite anthem, has been front and center in the recent wave of social protests that has rocked Iran from September 2022 onward.¹ At the same time, the movement's frame has been crystal clear in aiming for the rarest and most disruptive of social events—a revolution. Revolutions never foster normalcy; neither do they comfortably settle into something “normal” in their later phases. Whatever normal is, it is quite certainly not the authoritarian rule into which most social revolutions have historically lapsed. Can the pursuit of normalcy be revolutionary in any sense? In this essay I analyze the central role of normalcy in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and discuss how it helps us understand the movement's past and imagine its potential revolutionary futures. I first allude to the struggle of some Iranians to find a semblance of normalcy under abnormal circumstances in past decades, and suggest that Mahsa (Zhina) Amini's death determined the futility of this struggle for normalcy in the minds of many Iranians. I then analyze what it means for the movement to strive for “a normal life” and a revolution at the same time.

I was born and raised in postrevolutionary Iran. The macroaggressions and microaggressions inflicted upon women were countless as I grew up, and they continue to be. Many women believed their calling was to become activists and fight back as openly as possible. Many others, myself included, saw our calling elsewhere. We reluctantly accepted these aggressions as unreasonable and unjust realities of life but also decided to go about the rest of life as “normally” as possible: we met with friends, dated, engaged in sports and exercise, played music, ate out, traveled, and pursued a variety of careers. I somehow convinced myself that this was *some* kind of normal and that I could pursue what I *really* wanted to do with my life despite the limitations. Although aggressions were realities of life, they did not register as normal in our minds; it was not normal to have to endure symbolic or physical violence for your already limited lifestyle and sartorial choices. Instead, what many young women did was to focus their attention elsewhere, through exasperating emotional labor. I forced myself to believe that all the trade-offs, bargains, and sacrifices constituted a feasible compromise to make, as long as the violence and a host of otherwise unpleasant encounters—from verbal “warnings” issued by security guards at building entrances to being arrested by the Guidance Patrol (*gasht-i irshad*)—could be avoided as much as possible.

¹ Zuzanna Olszewska, “An Anthem from the Iranian Protests,” *Middle East Report Online*, 4 October 2022, <https://merip.org/2022/10/an-anthem-from-the-iranian-protests>. Roughly one year later, the movement is still alive in the form of civil disobedience (specifically, women defying the mandatory hijab), occasional and small gatherings and demonstrations, and online activism. The government's extensive and ruthless campaign of withholding civil services, shutting down businesses, policing the streets, arrests and kidnappings, and unjust prosecutions in the past few months has done little to change the new status quo.

Maintaining this bargain became more feasible during the postwar and reform era, from 1988 to 2004, as the government's totalitarian, Islamist measures were temporarily toned down—a post-Islamist turn, as Asef Bayat has described it.² Over recent years, however, it became more and more difficult to accept that despite authoritarian repression, corruption, and mismanagement, life still goes on. I witnessed the average living standard decline, as lifestyle policing and political crackdowns intensified and outbursts of protest faced brutal, deadly repression. The day Mahsa (Zhina) Amini died, September 16, 2022, came the moment of sudden realization: what had been a gradual shifting away from even a relative normal was final. Nothing could be perceived as normal anymore. Her death was the culmination of the recently intensifying violence of the Guidance Patrol, and immediate mass protests were organized in her hometown of Saqqez, Kurdistan, marking the beginning of months of unrest that stretched thin the government's repressive apparatus.

In the months of protest that ensued, our social media feeds have been full of scenes from life as if there were no Islamist repression; an unconditionally normal life, bravely reclaimed at the risk of harsh government persecution: scenes as banal as a girl walking on the streets of Tehran sporting a T-shirt and jeans; a female athlete competing internationally as Iran's representative without the mandatory hijab; a boy kissing his girlfriend in public; a girl kissing her girlfriend on the street; a young man dancing his heart out among friends. Apart from the awe and appreciation they inspired, these images kindled a previously unacknowledged, perhaps actively repressed, grief for what could have been. The fatigue of the emotional labor many of us had performed for years, pretending it was fine to give in to patriarchal demands to go about the rest of life seminormally, came down with a loud crash.

The right to live a "normal" life appeared so blatantly obvious that its being violently taken away by the Islamic Republic over the past decades was suddenly beyond comprehension. Relative normal was in no way enough anymore—it was not even clear how it ever could have been. The young, fearless protesters presented a quest for a normalcy that was unapologetically universal. Contrary to my generation, which sought either change or compromise within the limits of the Islamic Republic, the new generation had already lived another life vicariously through social media and other global outlets. Although they had not experienced life free of the government's Islamist intervention, except perhaps in their private spheres and outside of Iran if they had the financial means, it was not difficult for them to imagine their desired "normal." They no longer acknowledged limitations imposed by unjust laws of the Islamic Republic as realities, let alone the extralegal violence perpetrated on the population.

Before discussing the significance of this quest for normalcy, I should clarify that I do not claim that a universal normal exists, and do not intend to idealize some protesters' implicit assumption that it does. First, there is much discussion to be had regarding what normal is, and whose normal takes precedence over that of others. Examples from the movement suggest that for young, urban protesters, normal might be equated with a middle- and upper-class lifestyle under a liberal democracy or even in a neoliberal economy. This normal life could be understood as one in which citizens' private spheres and lifestyle choices are free of the government's ideological intervention. If this assumption is correct, then pursuing an allegedly universal normal cannot be innocent, as there is no such thing. Neither of these types of liberalism takes into account whose normal is being propagated, pursued, and enabled. They both dismiss the structural inequalities that need to be addressed in a more systematic way. The marginal appearance of ethnic minorities' plight within the movement's discourse despite their strong, organized participation in the resistance is telling.

Instead of valorizing normalcy as the focus of the movement, this essay addresses the implication of such a focus, including the ensuing disregard for more critical understandings of societal change. Furthermore, there have been countless diversions from this core concept during

² Asef Bayat, "The Making of Post-Islamist Iran," in *Post-Islamism, the Changing Faces of Political Islam*, ed. Asef Bayat (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the movement already, occasionally and partially steering it toward hypernationalism, Islamophobia, hypermasculinity, and other forms of intolerance. My intention is not to downplay such distractions. Rather, the analysis that follows considers the potential ramifications of the underlying quest for normalcy in an ideal-typical environment, while also acknowledging its inherent and contingent dilemmas, ills, and imperfections. That said, I propose that acknowledging the longing for normalcy as the ambition of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement is key to understanding many other aspects of it. Normalcy as an ideal is tightly connected to the way grievances are perceived, and the way they are acted upon. Below, I explore different aspects of this entanglement and its potential implications for the future of the movement.

Normalcy provided a foundation for what is perhaps the sharpest contrast between this movement and its precedents in Iran and neighboring countries: its intersectionality, both in terms of goals and in the profile of its participants. There is a taken-for-grantedness that connects all rather diverse foci of the movement. Just as women should not be deprived of the right to choose how to dress and where to go, the teenager should not be deprived of carefree fun, the teacher, the worker, and the pensioner should not be denied sustenance and dignity, the Baluch should not be deprived of identification cards, the Kurd should not be antagonized and murdered, the queer should not be denied the right to exist, and the future generation should not be deprived of a habitable planet.³ In the minds of many young protestors, all these ideas were as clear as day. It is worth reemphasizing that despite the unifying power of the normal, a variety of “normals” appear on this list, and their coexistence in the minds of the protestors does not imply an Innocent, egalitarian outlook. Whereas “dancing on the street” might be the desired normal for an upper-class Tehran kid, living free of life-threatening surveillance might be the normal that an Iranian Kurd strives for. In fact, equating the two in an offhand way signals the lack of a systematic assessment of inequalities.

The movement’s sweeping across many grievances and desired outcomes hints at another of its important characteristics—the absence of ideology. This is not unprecedented; recent revolutions have commonly occurred “without revolutionaries” who articulate the movement’s agenda.⁴ But Woman, Life, Freedom diverges in that it does not even focus on a certain category of grievances. Above and beyond its origins and its main slogan, this movement quickly decried a wide array of gender and ethnic discriminations, police brutality, working conditions, educational rights, climate mismanagement, corruption, and many other grievances at the same time. In this sense, the Woman Life Freedom movement is also arguably the first movement in history that is instigated and led by women, but is not exclusively about women’s rights. Rather, it is about the collective realization of the normalcy of lining up behind women; the realization that having women as vanguards does not make this movement about gender, just as lining up behind men has never had that effect. To use the wise words of two Iranian sociologists, “Woman” became “a key to go beyond the dichotomous system of sexual repression.”⁵

The most important implication of the centrality of normalcy in this movement, however, manifests itself in its disorganization. Scholars and activists alike have lamented this, which is also related to its lack of leadership. Following previous revolutionary scripts, they have remarked that in the absence of social movement organizations, albeit ambiguous and informal ones, it is difficult to imagine a prolonged, effective future for this movement. Such organizations would coordinate mobilization for street protests, strikes, civil disobedience

³ Khosrow Parsa, “The Iranian Uprising: A Synopsis,” trans. Arash Davari, *Spectre*, 1 May 2023.

⁴ Asef Bayat, *Revolutions without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Ebrahim Tofiq and Seyedmehdi Yousefi, “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi: Inqilab-i Milli ya Inqilab-i Mardom,” *Naqd-i Iqtisad-i Siyasi*, 21 December 2022, <https://pecritique.com/2022/12/21/%D8%B2%D9%86-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%DB%8C%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85>.

campaigns, and other forms of protest; connect different sectors such as labor strikes and student protests; and provide a vision for the future and a plan for transition. The relative waning of street protests in the past few months was foreseeable, in this sense. However, it is important to consider whether a movement striving for a normal life can lend itself to familiar repertoires of protest or revolutionary scripts at all.

Let us start with how normalcy as grievance is perceived phenomenologically, compared to other grievances. Longing for normalcy, however understood, is inherently different from well-being, political reform, and different forms of social equality. There is a certain immediacy in the perception of the normal. Any person's existing or desired normal is quite immediately imaginable to them. The fact that it is imagined or expected as normal, as taken for granted, testifies to this immediacy. The Farsi hashtag #Baraye, meaning "for" or "because of," which was the basis of the above-mentioned anthem, became popular as online protestors started to voice their everyday grievances, spontaneously listing the taken-for-granted things that they were deprived of. When it comes to structural socioeconomic grievances, by contrast, it takes some individual or collective theorizing to connect, for instance, poverty to elite corruption, or gender biases to historical patriarchy. Whether justified or not, a demand for normal does not need to go through the same thought process to be felt as grievance. I should clarify that I do not wish to claim that the Woman, Life, Freedom movement does not entail any form of collective, articulate consciousness, even if it lacks a cohesive ideology. Many themes, normalcy included, have found their way to the movement's self-conscious discourse. What I wish to highlight is that the sense of being deprived of a "normal" everyday life is perceived in more immediate and ineffable ways, compared to more classically recognized forms of grievance.

Normalcy as grievance is also more immediately actionable, accordingly. The taken-for-grantedness of the normal requires immediate, spontaneous, and possibly radical action in its absence. The ideal future is not only clear as day, but it also is already vicariously lived and therefore intimately felt. For the subjects of this grievance, politicization—if it can be called that at all—happens overnight. There is no desire for raising awareness, for articulating, for planning; no patience for organized politics. In fact, organized protests of the past are dismissed and even ridiculed, to the dismay of more experienced activists. During the movement, young protestors took pride in not having heard of the (in)famous Rajavis; the couple at the helm of the most structured social movement organization during the 1979 revolution, defamed over the years for their policies and methods.⁶ They sometimes looked down upon the "limited" reformist goals of the Green Movement, the mass protests to election fraud that swept Iran in 2009, and its leaders. Why would those protesters bother trying to work within the limits imposed by the Islamic Republic? This was the question asked by the new generation. The 1979 revolution itself was also highly criticized by many young protestors, that is, the children and grandchildren of the revolutionary generation, for enabling this demise of normalcy.

I should emphasize once again that I am not idealizing overnight politicization—or apolitical political action, to put it differently. Rather, I am merely introducing it as a possible interpretation of the movement's motivators and its past and future trajectory. In fact, the movement has been criticized not only for its lack of organization, but also for pursuing the political goal of regime change through an apolitical pose, dismissing past experience of movement organization and political activism. Iran has witnessed successive mass movements over the last two decades, all eventually repressed through

⁶ Under the leadership of Masoud and Maryam Rajavi, the Mojahedin-e Khalgh Organization (MEK) was an expansive resistance organization active against the Pahlavi government. Mostly repressed prior to the 1979 revolution, the Mojahedin regained power in the short period of political freedom following 1979, but they were quickly presented as the Islamic Republic's number one domestic enemy and pronounced illegal in 1981, pushing them to life in exile. Due both to their organizational presence and Iranian government propaganda, the MEK and Rajavis have been well-known political actors in the Iranian sphere, until recently.

violence and bloodshed. It is telling that despite this very recent history, the chorus to one of the protests' songs states otherwise: "This time it's different; this time blood has been shed . . . this time our youth have been taken."⁷ The understanding is that the farther away we are taken from normalcy, the more painful, intolerable, and exceptional it becomes. Hidden in this message is the assumption that a partisan's, a guerrilla's, a vocal activist's death is not as tragic, since it was not for the act or want of living a normal life that she was killed—she *left* normal life and went to battle. Therefore, "this time it's different."

As such, normalcy as a central presence in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement can be relied on to both highlight and explain its break from conventional social movement repertoires and potentially revolutionary scripts. This brings up a broader issue—a dilemma at the heart of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. If the first and foremost desire is living a normal life, then where does a revolution fit in? If the grievance is felt immediately and acted upon immediately—with a, if I may push the logic to the extreme, live-normal-or-die mindset—how can regime change, transition, and postrevolutionary institution-building be imagined? Revolutions are exactly a break from the normal, and they have almost never led to a normal life, in the sense of an affluent liberal democracy—never, ever have they *immediately* led to such life. The lack of leadership, organization, and political awareness that correctly have been identified as weaknesses of this movement are, I believe, rather an inherent part of it. Organizations have not only not emerged because of brutal repression and lack of political opportunities, but also because the movement's flagbearers—with their astonishing courage, yearning, and sense of solidarity with one another—do not easily fit into established patterns. Does that mean that this movement will never be revolutionary?

Perhaps. Or perhaps we should wait to see if a new revolutionary script will unfold—one in which the authoritarian regime will gradually wither because it is simply an existential dilemma for its citizens; to the point that there are so many fissures and desertions in response that the slightest of shocks will topple the regime. The war of attrition between unhappy citizens and the Islamic Republic hardliners is a possible scenario only because longing for normalcy as a grievance is not going to disappear. The vividly pictured parallel world, vicariously or stealthily lived already, is not an experience that can be undone. The truth of a grievance—injustice, inequality, poverty, abuse—never disappears until it is resolved, but the heightened collective emotion toward it does. The immediacy and prevalence of the grief for normalcy, however, can linger on. The repressions, the shutting down of businesses for serving "improperly dressed" women, the executions, arrests, and beatings and murders on the streets by the hand of the state might have suppressed street protests, but they have failed to suppress the longing for normalcy—they have only strengthened it. That is certainly one way that, indeed, "this time it is different."

⁷ 021G, "In Dafe | 021G," YouTube video, 2:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjbqWHAF5vi&ab_channel=021G (accessed 31 October 2023).