World Class Podcast
“Women, Life, and Freedom in Iran”
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This transcript has been edited for clarity.

McFaul: You’re listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring you in-depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford’s campus, straight to you. I’m your host, Michael McFaul, the director of Freeman Spogli Institute.

Today I’m joined by Abbas Milani. Abbas is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, a visiting professor in the department of political science, and also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and the Freeman Spogli Institute. Abbas is also a good friend of mine who I’ve worked with for many, many years, just so everybody knows.

We’re here today to talk about the protests in Iran. It’s been four months now since Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman in Tehran, died while in the custody of Iran’s morality police. The backlash from the public of Iran has been significant, leading to some of the largest protests in the country since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Dr. Milani will help us understand what this means for the people of Iran now, and what it might signal about where the country is heading in the future.

So Abbas, thanks again for coming back to World Class.

Milani: As always, it’s a pleasure to chat with you, Mike. And it’s an honor to have you as a friend, as a colleague, as a co-author, and as a beacon of hope for democracy.

McFaul: Always great to see you too, Abbas. So let’s start with the beginning. Before we jump to where we’re at now and the future, help our listeners remember how this all started, how it grew, who’s participating, and the evolution of the protests up to this moment today.

Milani: In a sense, that evolution of it goes back to the efforts of the Islamic Republic to force hijab on woman. As soon as they attempted to force the hijab, Iranian women began to fight back. In recent months, the brutality of the so-called “morality police” had increasingly become a subject of anger and a subject of resistance. There were several instances when the morality police (so-called used very tough tactics to get a woman in a truck, for example
And when Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish young woman who was visiting in Tehran, as you said, died under police custody, that was the trigger that led to this now 120 days of resistance.

**McFaul:** And tell us a little more about how these protests took off. I’m assuming there are atrocities happening in Iran all the time. But something was special about these conditions that led to these mass revolts. Tell us a little bit more about how that happened.

**Milani:** You know Mike, I think the Iranian regime is sitting on a seething volcano of anger, of disappointment, of unemployment, of double-digit inflation, of corruption, of cronyism, of over-emphasis, of helping Russia and the involvement in the Ukrainian War that I think a majority of the people in Iran don’t want.

**McFaul:** Interesting.

**Milani:** All of these things have created an atmosphere that anything could trigger. And Mahsa Amini the way she died, and some of the pictures that emerged, and the lies, after lies, after lies of the Iranian regime demise was just the trigger to make that explosion.

**McFaul:** Tell us more about who is protesting, and what is the frequency of protests? Has it tapered off recently? But start with the demographics of who is on the street.

**Milani:** I think the most important aspect of this movement that sets it apart from everything that has happened in Iran is that it was led by women. It was led very soon around this one very progressive, outspoken woman. And that’s the slogan: “Women, Life, and Freedom.”

**McFaul:** That’s the phrase, those three words?

**Milani:** Those three words. And in one sense, I think it is even more progressive than “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” because it has women central to it. It has life. It has joy.

The Iranian regime is profoundly misogynist. It is sickly addicted to the culture of grief, a culture of mourning, and a culture of martyrdom. And it believes that it has the God-given right to control people’s lives.

This slogan says that women should have equal lives, and that we as Iranian human beings have a right to joy, and everyone to liberty. That ignited and created its longevity in terms of the involvement of women, in terms of the leadership women, the involvement of youth, the decentralized leadership of it, the expanse of it from the north to the south and the east to the west in small towns and small villages and in big towns and big villages. I think it is unique in the 44-year history of this regime.
McFaul: Interesting. So, this is even bigger and more widespread set of protests that we saw in 2009 during the so-called Green Revolution after that the contested — well, stolen — election there? Maybe you could remind everybody about what happened in 2009 and then explain how this set of protests are different.

Milani: In 2009, there was an election that by almost all the scholarly consensus, except those who advocate for the regime, was a stolen election. Mr. Khamenei put in Ahmadinejad. People took to the street — several million I think. But their demand was essentially for their vote to be counted.

McFaul: Okay.

Milani: What makes this time very different is that their demand is not a change of the regime; they no longer want just a free election. They realize that this regime will not allow them to have a free election. And I don't think this turn, there's ever been a demonstration that in one day, for example, 2 million people gathered. But if you add the number of people who participated in this, and you add the number of cities and villages that participated, it is larger than 2009, and more radical.

McFaul: That's very interesting. So more radical, and more sustained too, right?

Milani: Absolutely.

McFaul: Well, it seems like the regime looks pretty nervous. They've done some very horrific things to some demonstrators. Tell us a little bit about what the crackdown has been like.

Milani: They have arrested upward of 20,000 people. They have killed upwards of 500 people and they have executed, so far, four people in absolute sham trials. And the way they have brutalized these people have turned each of these into a kind of iconic character. A young man who was essentially executed because he blocked a street, and they claim he took part in hitting or killing a Basij.

They have shut down the internet at will. They have constantly threatened people with more executions. As you indicated earlier, I think the demonstrations have now tapered off, but the regime, I think, is not out of the woods. I would be very surprised if they don't reignite because the economy is in shambles.

To give you an example of their incompetence, the Iranian country sits on at least the second largest reservoir of gas. But there are now major cities — Tehran, for example — that for the last two or three days, a third of Tehran was shut down because they can't get gas and they can’t heat their homes.
McFaul: I didn't know that.

Milani: It's just a remarkable story. The universities have been shut down. Dormitories have been shut down. And to give you a sense, because I know how closely you follow Russia and Ukraine, the subservience of this regime to Putin is such that they have not dared enter the gas market in Europe. They thought that with Russia cutting down gas supplies to Europe and that it will be a cold winter that Europe will come begging for a deal on the nuclear deal

McFaul: Right.

Milani: Well, the reverse had happened. Europe is now having a fairly warm winter and it's the Iranians who are having a cold winter.

McFaul: Well, that is really interesting. I want to get to the regime and foreign policy in a minute and the implications of the demonstrations for foreign policy. But one last question on the nature of the protests: there doesn't seem to be like a single leader of these protests. Is that right? And if so, what does that mean in terms of its longevity?

Milani: You're absolutely right. There is no one single leader. There is decentralized leadership. There's almost neighborhood-by-neighborhood committees that organize this. I think people have learned that one charismatic leader, first of all, can lie to them as Khamenei lied to the people. One leader can easily be taken out as the leader of 2009 was. He is still lingering in house arrest with his wife.

McFaul: All this time, Abbas, he's still in house arrest?

Milani: He's still under house arrest. is still under house arrest. People have recognized, I think, that they need to avoid making one leader. The other aspect of this that makes finding leadership difficult is how brutal the regime is inside Iran.

Everyone recognizes that the leadership of this movement has to be a combination of people outside Iran and inside Iran, primarily inside Iran, but some outside Iran. Bringing that together has been difficult but there are lots of efforts — lots of efforts afoot as we speak — to try to make that a reality.

McFaul: That's interesting, because in the past, we've talked about the divisions between external actors and domestic actors. By the way, there are many instances of revolutionary situations where that was the case. And when they get together — I'm thinking particularly about South Africa right now – when that does coalesce, it does lead to very unexpected positive changes. So that's interesting to hear.
Milani: Exactly.

McFaul: Tell us a little bit about the regime now. Is it united, or do you see cracks or any divisions? These are obviously very difficult things to see from far away and in the in the public domain, but I’m curious as to how you think the regime is holding together so far.

Milani: I think they have essentially held together, but there are definitely signs of cracks. Some of the top Islamic scholars in Iran just last week, jointly essentially, declared that this can't go on, and that incompetent people are running the country and corruption is endemic.

There are cracks within the IRGC even. Some commanders of the IRGC have suggested that this can't go on, that you can't contain this only by suppressing the people. But Khamenei is still in virtual control. The IRGC has essentially held together. If Europe goes through with declaring IRGC as a terrorist organization, I think we're going to see more dissension amongst the ranks because that is going to jeopardize their economic viability.

McFaul: That hasn't happened so far, right? Just to be clear.

Milani: They have declared an inclination to do so, but it hasn't legally happened. And I think if it does happen, it will be a major blow to the IRGC. And that might create the kind of cracks that you're referring to.

McFaul: Right. Interesting. And where would those cracks come? Go through it a little bit. What should people be looking for in terms of different groups within the regime?

Milani: First of all, I think there are clearly people within the IRG who think the path of Khamenei, the path of suppressing, the paths of brutality, the path of not giving an inch, the path of saying, “All opposition to me is foreign intrigue” is not going to help them get out of this.

Some of them, I think, do believe that they need to make some compromise. In fact, South Africa has often been referred to in the discourse in the social media in Iran.

McFaul: Is that right? I didn't know that!

Milani: You and I have talked about this before, about how a kind of a pacted transition the way South Africa had, the way Chile had, the way Poland had, might be a way to go forward. There are people within the regime I know for a fact — I know from personal context — that they believe that this might be the way to go. So, those are signs of cracks. But still, it hasn't collapsed. The regime hasn't collapsed, but it is in dire economic means.
McFaul: Many years ago when I was writing about revolutions, I said — I'm paraphrasing, but I was probably stealing from somebody else. Anyway, I said, “Before they happen, revolutions seem impossible. And after they happen, they seem inevitable.” And I’m constantly reminded that we’re bad at predicting point predictions about these kinds of things. But the story you’re telling me, including the structural story, sounds like it’s a very dire moment for this regime. Is that fair to say?

Milani: I think this is the most serious challenge they have faced, because not only has it been the most sustained movement of opposition to them and the most expansive, but the power of that movement has united the opposition outside in a way it has never existed. The Iranian diaspora today is more motivated, more organized, more seriously trying to find a way to help from very prosperous Iranians who had never had anything to do with politics, who are now saying, “Enough is enough. I need to do my share.” So both of these, and the change in Europe away from trying to compromise with this regime.

McFaul: Right, right. That’s a big change, right?

Milani: That’s a big change. And a begrudging change in the Biden administration. I think there are some in the Biden administration who still harbor with the illusion that they can make a deal with this regime. But by and large, I think the landscape has changed as the regime has become more beholden to Putin and as they have become more involved in the war in Ukraine. I think Europe and the United States have realized that a democratic Iran might be a better option for them than a continuation of the status quo.

McFaul: Well, I want to speculate about that in a minute. But before we do, one last question about international politics. You just alluded to it, but it is striking to me as somebody who watches Russia, Ukraine carefully, and China and Iran, for that matter. It does seem like the autocrats of the world are coming closer to each other as they all face their own domestic and foreign policy challenges.

Tell us a little bit about how you see that, especially that relationship between Iran and Russia. Iran is the biggest supplier of military weapons to Russia. The North Koreans are in that business too, but without question, Iran is the leader. Is that related to what's going on domestically, or should we think about that as separate and apart from what's going on domestically?

Milani: I think it's very much connected to the domestic situation. There are reports that Russia is helping the regime in its oppressive apparatus in terms of its intelligence work.

McFaul: Uh huh.
Milani: But the other foreign policy aspect of it that I think is interesting, is China. As you and I wrote about several months ago, the Iranian regime offered China a twenty-five-year deal that was absolutely remarkable in how generous it was to China. China decided not to take that deal. China instead made a deal with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Qatar, Iraq.

McFaul: Yes.

Milani: To me, China is not as desperate as Russia for allies. China has studied the landscape and realize this is not a regime that can last long. Russia has no choice but to cling on to this regime. And this regime has no choice but to cling on to Russia.

McFaul: Right. But that is very interesting about China. Right? They're hedging their bets. Maybe they don't want to go down with the ship of the theocracy in Iran.

Milani: Absolutely. To me, that's the only conclusion I have. And they've invested several tens of billions of dollars in those countries, but virtually nothing in Iran. But when the President of China traveled to Saudi Arabia, he was given a royal welcome. That's very different from the welcome they gave to Biden. The declaration at the end of the meeting was almost verbatim what Saudi Arabia wanted, and a virtual condemnation of Iran and the region.

McFaul: Wow. That is really striking. That's an area to keep watching, as we say.

So last question, Abbas. And I know this is very speculative, but there are people that make the argument that countries have interests, and it doesn't really matter if they're democracies or dictatorships, and therefore, a democratic revolution in Iran wouldn't really change the way Iran interacts in its neighborhood or with the United States or these countries like Russia and China that we've been just talking about. What's your view on that? How would a democratic Iran behave differently in the international system?

Milani: I think it would behave radically different, because I think a democratic Iran will try to base policy on national interests rather than ideological preferences or sectarian preferences.

Mr. Khamenei spends billions of dollars arming Hezbollah, arming the Houthis, arming the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and forfeiting Iran's ability to be a major player, I think. They have completely bankrupted the Iranian economy. To me, a democratic Iran will consider the United States as an ally, someone to be dealt with independently, firmly, but friendly.

A democratic Iran, would think of Israel as a potential ally of Iran. They would defend the rights of the Palestinians to have the state like the shah did, but also consider Israel as a
strategic ally. Iran has no enmity with Israel. Jews have lived in Iran for 3000 years: more than any other Muslim country in the world, maybe with the exception of Egypt.

So to me, that is the possibility of a democratic Iran. And you have written about this often, Mike, that democratic countries tend to fight fewer wars.

McFaul: Right.

Milani: That seems to be a statistical fact you can rely on. The Iranian regime is virtually involved in every shenanigan in the region. A democratic Iran, I think, has no interest, for example, in putting 150,000 missiles in Lebanon or spending billions of dollars arming the Hezbollah in order to have some potential force against Israel. In democratic Iran, we see Israel — and Israel, I think, would see a democratic Iran — as an ally.

McFaul: Well, let's hope for that future. I think that's a good note to end on. Thanks for being here again, Abbas, and we'll always have you back because there's still a lot of drama, I think, that's yet to come inside Iran.

Milani: It will always be a pleasure, sir.

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