

**Politics of chicness: How fashion becomes the defiant apparatus**

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The Islamic regime in Iran has been endeavouring to engineer what it perceives as the moral society for the past 37 years. Cultivating the idea of an Islamised body and in particular controlling the female body has been central to the regime's moral agenda, aiming to make disciplined bodies that have to conform to the state's ideology. However, despite 37 years of implementing various policies, Tehran and other big cities are nowadays increasingly unlike the image of an ideal modest Islamised society fantasised by the Islamic regime. Accordingly, middle class Iranian women, with their loose shawls and colourful robes, do not submit to the Islamic dress codes and its defined aesthetic politics. Moreover, these youngsters do not fit into the image propagated by the state media that consistently portrays a good Muslim woman as a modest and docile one who is also properly veiled in dark colours, tirelessly trying to make herself 'invisible'.

In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, Khomeini and other revolutionaries considered the Islamic hijab as the marker of the Islamic society to differentiate it from the west or what Khomeini perceived as the 'Great Evil'. Khomeini regarded the Islamic hijab and refashioning the female body as the way to defy the concept of the previous Pahlavi regime's modernisation and what symbolised westernisation: the modern young woman, whom in Islamic revolutionary discourse, was depicted as 'seditious', 'dangerous' and 'destructive of public honour'.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of the past decades, the Islamic regime has designed many plans, generated much legislation and created various organisations to enforce the mandatory hijab and limit those it regards as destructive agents of public honour. To this end, establishing the 'morality police' and defining moral plans since the early years of the revolution to enforce the wearing of the hijab by women in public spaces has been never out of the state's mandate.

Looking into the history of the Islamic republic, in the first decade following the Islamic revolution, the Islamic regime established Islamic revolutionary committees (*kommitehha-e enghalab eslami*) that were responsible for enforcing this morality control and confronting 'bad hijab' women and 'make-up' along with other 'moral crimes' or 'immoral behaviour,' including extramarital sexual relationships, alcohol consumption, the playing of loud music and gambling. Following the Iran-Iraq war, the paramilitary *Basij-e Mostaz'afin* (Mobilisation of the Oppressed) volunteer militia was asked by the state to cooperate with the Islamic revolutionary committees as a morality police force to combat immoral behaviour and of course, poorly veiled women. Since then, the *Basij* has been the backbone of the morality police in the state's main aggressive plans against middle class, supposedly liberal-minded, Iranian women. After the victory of Mohammed Khatami and the reformists in the 1997 elections, the activity of the *Basij* as morality police decreased and consequently women who did not follow certain dress codes were confronted with less pressure, yet the on going challenge between women and the state has been never suspended.

Following Ahmadinejad's presidency, when the hardliners came to power in 2007, the regime's efforts at enforcing 'public chastity' dramatically increased and in 2009, one of the regime's most hostile initiatives since the Islamic revolution began was advanced. Continuing to this day, the *Tarh-e efaf va hijab* (Hijab and Chastity Plan) aims at arresting women in public spaces for violating the Islamic dress code or wearing western-style clothing.<sup>2</sup> The 7,000-strong undercover 'moral police' force in the capital Tehran were hired to crack down on what they consider as moral transgressions including 'bad-hijab' women.

However, despite more than three decades of this intense confrontation, these days Tehran and other big cities in Iran have attracted the fashion industry's attention worldwide. Western media publish images of modern Iranian women's street style, showcasing those with colourful shawls that hardly cover their heads, fashionable leggings, open front robes that generously present their body contours and artfully made up faces. No matter the extent to which the morality police and chastity plans relentlessly persist, the modern Iranian woman has learnt how to manipulate certain Islamic dress codes to design her trendy 'bricolage' and create 'something fresh, unexpected, expressive and usually defiant' out of obligatory and imposed Islamic dress codes.

During recent decades, the Islamic Republic refutes this fashionable Islamic veil by deploying the policy of the 'Islamisation of fashion', adopting and transforming Western fashion shows and rituals, defining an Islamic fashion model and issuing policies against the Westernisation of the Islamic veil. All these policies seem

<sup>1</sup> Afshar, H., 1987. "Women, Marriage and the State in Iran." In H. Afshar, ed., *Women, State and Ideology*. pp. 70-86. London: Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Golkar, S., 2011. *Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society*.

abortive, faced with the advent of female independent fashion designers, who as 'cultural intermediaries' in their private fashion studios produce fashionable clothes that pursue different dress codes from what the state considers appropriate and public 'decent' dress for women, and use social networks including Instagram for marketing and selling their designed attires.

Like never before, the Islamic regime in Iran has been consistently focused on, and overwhelmingly confused by the rise of what one can consider a 'fashion movement in Iran'. The regime recently, as part of an operation called Spider II, arrested a number of Iranian women (models) who posed for photographs on Instagram without wearing the hijab. The officials mentioned that they carried out the operation in order to defend the 'honour' of Muslim women, to protect Islamic and national identity and exclude 'unhealthy' online content. The officials equated modelling with 'promoting the normalization of promiscuity' and even targeted Kim Kardashian for possible espionage, using her Instagram account to subvert the nation's values, with the help of Instagram's CEO.<sup>3</sup>

In short, without being affected by these efforts too much, the fashion industry in Iran is on the rise. And when one discusses fashion in Iran, it means much more than defining it as a 'distinctive and often habitual style trend', or as some western accounts would claim, a 'consumer item' that makes the female body subjected to gazes, or a tool for the female body to 'self-objectify', but rather, the beautification of the Islamic hijab in Iran is a form of negotiation with the dominant ideology or a 'quiet encroachment', since it is a way for Iranian women to push the boundaries through a specific use of the dress codes and reclaim their own essential right of choosing their own attire.

Finally even, this is the way of redeeming the right to be chic and stylishly fashionable...

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<sup>3</sup> Maya Oppenheim, Iran accuses Kim Kardashian of working with Instagram CEO to corrupt Iranian women, Independent, May 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/iran-accuses-kim-kardashian-west-of-working-with-instagram-ceo-to-corrupt-iranian-women-a7037726.html>