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WORLD MIDDLE EAST

Iran Abolishes Morality Police, Considers Changing Hijab Laws, Official Says

Move is aimed at trying to quiet protests that have taken place across the country, analysts say



Iran's enforcement of laws around women's head coverings sparked the nationwide protest movement.

PHOTO: ROUZBEH FOULADI/ZUMA PRESS

By *David S. Cloud* [Follow](#)

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Iran's attorney general said the country had disbanded its so-called morality police and is considering altering the requirement that women cover their heads in public, a move that analysts said was aimed at peeling away support for antigovernment protests.

Mohammad-Jafar Montazeri outlined the steps Saturday, saying the law requiring veils, known as hijabs, was under review by Iran's Parliament and judiciary, and that the morality police had been abolished, according to government-run news agencies.

President Ebrahim Raisi echoed his remarks in a televised speech Saturday,

saying Iran's Islamic system was enshrined in its constitution but adding, "There are methods of implementing the constitution that can be flexible."

It is unclear if such comments reflect a high-level decision by Iran's rulers to make significant changes in the system of enforcing the hijab law or if they are temporary overtures aimed at helping to suppress the protests, analysts said.

"I think that they are just trying to show that they can be flexible, but what they are not doing is making meaningful compromises," said Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House, a London-based think tank.

Mr. Montazeri said that recommendations for changes in the hijab law would be made later this month. "We are working on the issue of hijab quickly and trying to employ a wise solution," he said.

He said the disbanding of the morality police, a force established in 2005, had been made by a committee of government officials but provided no other details. He said the country's Islamic courts would continue to monitor public behavior, according to media accounts of his remarks.

The laws around women's head coverings sparked the nationwide protest movement that began after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who died in custody after being arrested by the morality police for improperly wearing her hijab. Her death touched a nerve among many Iranian families whose female members have been targeted by officers tasked with enforcing the country's strict Islamic codes for clothing and behavior. Among those protesting have been conservative women and men, joining throngs of young secular people who say the enforcement of rules has often been capricious.

Some women have burned their hijabs and shunned wearing them in public since the protests started. Many young protesters say they are seeking not only elimination of the hijab but to bring down Iran's theocratic government.

The regime appears to be testing if such concessions might peel away broader support for the demonstrations among other Iranians, analysts say.

"They are probably tired and think some small superficial concessions like this will quell the uprising against them," said Mahsa Alimardani, a senior

researcher at London-based Article 19, a human-rights group. “This move certainly won’t stop protesters or appease those chanting for complete regime change.”

The morality police have eased their enforcement of the hijab law and other statutes regulating women’s public dress and behavior since the protests began, Iranians and analysts say. But there has been no official announcement that the police force has been disbanded, other than Mr. Montazeri’s comments.

The widespread support for the protests may force the government to abandon enforcement of the hijab law in most public places other than in government buildings, official events and other high-profile circumstances, analysts said.

Support for the hijab statute remains strong among male conservatives and clerics, complicating any move to eliminate it by Iran’s hard-line leadership. Only weeks before the protests began, Mr. Raisi himself called publicly for stricter enforcement of the law, according to accounts by state-run news agencies.



Iran has been rocked by protests for months.

PHOTO: WANA NEWS AGENCY/VIA REUTERS

Aliasghar Anabestani, a conservative member of Parliament, called last week for the denial of government benefits to any women detained for failing to wear a headscarf, according to Iranian media outlets.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president, tightened the hijab laws and enforcement during his tenure from 2005 to 2013, creating the modern version of the morality police and empowering them.

Their white vans became a familiar and feared site throughout the country. In Tehran, the group often conducts checks in crowded areas and outside subway stations and takes women back to the Vozara detention center, a drab two-story building that faces a pine-tree-lined park frequented by local families and tourists.

Women observed not wearing a headscarf, even while riding in a vehicle, could sometimes be summoned for questioning by the morality police, who would text their phones after tracking the car's license plate.

Yet their presence on the street had been on the decline until Mr. Raisi took office in 2021 and stepped up their aggressiveness at enforcing the dress code, according to Ms. Vakil. For that reason, getting rid of the force might be an option even conservatives could accept.

“It's probably the lowest-lying fruit and the easiest change the Islamic Republic could make,” she said. “I read this as symbolic and certainly not enough to build back bridges or placate the protesters.”

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Corrections & Amplifications

Iran's attorney general is Mohammad-Jafar Montazeri. An earlier version of this article misspelled his last name as Montezari. (Corrected on Dec. 4)