Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Has the morality policy in Iran been relegated to history?

Should Iranians, and especially women in Iran be wary, rather than relax after the statement from the leaders of the regime in Tehran that the so-called "morality police" has been abolished? The trenches within Iranian society are very deep, so the statement of Attorney General Mohammad-Jafar Montazeri on the abolition of its signifcant instrument for controlling "correct" behaviour in the Islamic Republic has been understandably received with reservations. Further steps from the regime are awaited.

The alarm bell rang after reports from a religious gathering where one of the participants (or a reporter) asked Montazeri "why the morality police are being shut down?“ According to a report by ISNA (Iranian Student's News Agency), the attorney general said, “The morality police have nothing to do with the judiciary. It was abolished from the same place it was launched. Of course, the judiciary will continue to monitor society’s behaviour."

Reasons to believe that Tehran is backing down

However, the statement of Attorney General Montazeri was not delivered suddenly, and he was not the first to indicate that the authorities in Tehran are moving towards easing the repression of protests, which have been continuing for months across the country following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. She was arrested by the morality police, allegedly for not wearing the hijab in accordance with government standards.

Montazeri himself said on Friday that "both parliament and the judiciary are working (on the issue)" of whether the law requiring women to cover their heads needs to be changed. Those announcements were strongly supported by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Saturday, who said that Iran's republican and Islamic foundations were constitutionally entrenched "but there are methods of implementing the constitution that can be flexible".

Following such a series of convincing announcements about decisions being prepared or already reached to give in to the two-months’ protests of thousands of Iranians, Montazeri's latest statement might suggest that the government in Tehran has been forced to back down and dissolve one of the important pillars of control and repression over the population. And to open space for long-term "flexibility" in the implementation of Islamic rules, through a change in the law.

Reasons not to believe in concessions

The reactions of the mainstream Iranian media after Montazeri's statement on Saturday, show visible effort to amortize and even reject that statement, and also suggest that there are many reasons to be cautious about the news coming out of Tehran. They interpret that the attorney general only raised the legal fact that "Gasht-e Ershad" (Guidance Patrol) as an organisation does not belong to the judicial system, for which he is responsible. And that all other interpretations, in particular those in the Western media that the morality policy has been dissolved, are wrong. Confusion about the interpretation of Montazeri's words is also contributed by the fact that no other Iranian officials have made any announcements in connection with that statement on Sunday.

Therefore, the second, more important part of Montazeri's statement that the morality policy "was abolished from the same place it was launched", remains in the air. These are certainly not judicial authorities, but they are law enforcement authorities, which, however, have not made an announcement.

The morality policy was introduced in 2005 under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in order to "spread the culture of modesty and hijab", the obligatory female head scarf. Members of the morality police began patrolling Iran a year later, recognisable by their white vans mode of transport. The male members are dressed in uniforms, and the female members are dressed in long black

chadors. They patrol squares, busy streets and places where many people gather and react if they notice women who do not wear the hijab.

The obligation to wear the hijab was introduced in 1983, four years after the Islamic revolution in Iran, and at the beginning of its work, the morality police only issued warnings to women. But for 15 years now, they have been using violence and arresting Iranian women if they do not comply with this rule.

Possible consequences

The future attitude of the regime in Iran regarding the mass protests will not be clear until Iran's highest institutions, those with elected representatives, and especially those led by unelected leaders such as the Supreme National Security Council, the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council, confirm or reject the allegations about the future of the morality police.

"At the moment, the authorities are implementing two policies at the same time - the policy of the stick and the policy of the carrot", says Kamran Martin, senior lecturer on international relations at the University of Sussex. "They are intensifying arrests and increasing the military presence in some parts of the country, and at the same time sending signals and messages about the flexibility and adaptability of the Islamic State on some issues, such as wearing the hijab."

However, he points out that Attorney General Montazeri's statements are the first time that Iran has announced a more flexible approach, which may seem as if the two-months' protests have been a success. But it is also possible that it is a tactic of the regime and that by announcing concessions it wants to discourage further actions by the protesters, which have been announced for next week.

According to Stratfor analysis from December 1, the mass protests in Iran are highly unlikely to change the country's political system, but their persistence will drive domestic instability, harden the government against social reforms, and damage Iran's foreign relationships. Even if the current wave of protests eventually dies down, the ground will remain fertile in Iran for social and political movements to demand reforms in the future.