
Unbuilding Authority: Everyday Space and the Architecture of Power in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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This article examines how authoritarian power in post-revolutionary Iran is reproduced through the organisation of everyday space. It argues that the Islamic Republic sustains authority not only through institutional coercion, but through a performative spatial order that regulates how bodies appear, move, and become legible in public. Practices such as compulsory hijab, gendered spatial arrangements, and mediated representations of normative behaviour function as an architecture of power that stabilises authority through repetition and habituation.

The 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement disrupted this spatial order through dispersed acts of bodily and spatial misalignment. Removing compulsory hijab, crossing behavioural boundaries, and circulating images of these acts unsettled the routines through which authority is reproduced. These interventions did not dismantle the system, but exposed its reliance on continuous alignment and visibility.

By analysing both the production and disruption of spatial discipline, the article argues that authoritarian power is not simply imposed, but enacted through everyday practices. It further suggests that moments of disruption reveal the contingency and fragility of this performative order. In this sense, space emerges not as the backdrop of politics, but as one of its primary instruments.

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Unbuilding Authority: Everyday Space and the Architecture of Power in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Sara Gholami

Introduction

Authority often appears in its most durable form as routine in everyday space. It is encountered in the layout of streets, the expectations attached to clothing, the regulation of visibility, and the implicit rules governing how bodies move and gather. Long before it is experienced as force, it is learned as habit. In this sense, public space is a medium through which political order is enacted and perceived. Analyses of authoritarianism often foreground institutional repression or ideological discourse;¹ this paper instead examines the infrastructural reproduction of power through everyday spatial discipline. By conceptualizing authoritarian authority as a spatially performative order sustained through everyday bodily alignment, this article shifts attention from institutional coercion to mundane spatial practices. It draws on spatial theory, disciplinary power, symbolic violence, and performativity in conversation with studies of Iranian urban, gendered, and mediated space.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, authority operates through the continuous organisation and regulation of everyday space. The state's presence is woven into spatial arrangements that structure daily life: the gendering of spaces, the monitoring of dress and behaviour, and the circulation of normative images in media.² These practices do more than signal ideology: they shape perception and behaviour, orienting citizens toward particular understandings of propriety, morality, and belonging.

This paper approaches these processes through what I call an 'architecture of power,' by which I mean the spatial organisation of visibility, movement, and interaction through which authority becomes embedded in everyday life. By 'power,' I refer not simply to coercive force, but to the capacity to structure conduct, shape perception, and organise the field of possible action. Through repetition, these arrangements become naturalised, producing a sense of order that obscures their coercive foundations. In this way, authority operates not only through direct enforcement but also through what Pierre

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (NYU Press, 2001).

² Nazanin Shahrokni, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (University of California Press, 2020).

Bourdieu terms symbolic violence: forms of domination that become misrecognised as normal, necessary, or morally self-evident.

The 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement, which emerged following the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody, brought this spatial order into crisis, revealing how everyday bodily practices can become sites of political contestation.³ Its most consequential acts did not primarily target state institutions; rather, they unsettled the spatial scripts through which authority is reproduced. Removing the compulsory hijab in public, crossing gendered and behavioural boundaries, and circulating videos of these acts online constituted forms of non-aligned spatial practice. These gestures interrupted the order that sustains the state's moral and political claims, exposing the extent to which authority depends on the regulation of ordinary space.

This paper argues that the Islamic Republic's authority is built through everyday architectures and that moments of protest can momentarily unbuild them by disrupting their spatial logic, revealing that authoritarian durability depends less on constant repression than on the reliable reproduction of spatial alignment.

I. The Architecture of Power: Space as Performance

At the outset, it is important to recognise that space must be understood as socially produced rather than naturally given. Henri Lefebvre famously argues that space is not a neutral container within which social life unfolds but a social product generated through political, economic, and cultural relations.⁴ More recent spatial theorists such as Martina Löw conceptualise space as relational and processual, produced through acts of arrangement and perception rather than existing as a fixed backdrop.⁵ What appears stable, rational, and natural may conceal a complex history of political decisions and social struggles that recedes from view once spatial arrangements become taken for granted, allowing authority to operate as environment rather than intervention.

It is for this reason that this article employs the concept of an 'architecture of power.' Architecture is used here not in the narrow sense of buildings or urban design, but as a broader organising framework that draws attention to how diverse elements—spatial rules, visibility regimes, behavioural norms, symbolic inscriptions, and mediated images—are assembled into a coherent environment that structures conduct. Unlike

³ Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Basil Blackwell, 1991).

⁵ Martina Löw, *The Sociology of Space: Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*, trans. by Donald Goodwin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

concepts such as ideology or discipline alone, architecture foregrounds the spatial organisation through which authority becomes embedded in everyday life. It captures how power is encountered not merely through institutions or laws, but through the ordinary environments within which people move, appear, and interact.⁶

Architecture, however, does not simply organise space; it must also be continually enacted. In this article, performance is understood not as theatrical spectacle but as the repeated social enactment through which norms acquire durability. Spatial order is performative because it exists only insofar as it is reproduced through everyday practice. Rules governing dress, movement, visibility, and interaction derive their force not simply from legal codification but from their continual repetition by ordinary bodies.

This relationship between space and performance becomes particularly visible in systems of discipline. As Matthew Hannah argues, modern forms of control rely not only on formal prohibition but on spatially organised regimes of visibility through which conduct is observed, judged, and normalised.⁷ Authority is not merely imposed on space; it is enacted through bodies moving in expected ways. Through repetition, particular ways of dressing, moving, appearing, and relating come to function as everyday codes of acceptable presence. These repeated bodily alignments produce not only obedient subjects but also the appearance of a coherent social order.

In Iran, this performative disciplining of the body is especially visible in the regulation of public appearance and conduct. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has treated public space as a moralised environment in which bodies must align with ideological expectations. The mandatory hijab for women, restrictions on certain forms of dress, limitations on public dancing, and regulations governing physical intimacy all contribute to a spatial order in which behaviour and visibility are politically meaningful. Here Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power remains useful. The production of 'docile bodies' depends not only on punishment but on systems of surveillance and spatial organisation through which individuals learn to anticipate observation and regulate themselves accordingly.⁸

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern power increasingly operates through surveillance, examination, and the internalisation of observation rather than through public displays of force.⁹ The effectiveness of disciplinary power therefore lies

⁶ Melissa Tyler and Laurie Cohen, 'Spaces that Matter: Gender Performativity and Organizational Space', *Organization Studies*, 31.2 (2010), pp. 175–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609357381>.

⁷ Matthew G. Hannah, 'Space and the Structuring of Disciplinary Power: An Interpretive Review', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 79.3 (1997), pp. 171–80.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 135–70, 195–228.

⁹ Ibid.

not in continuous intervention but in the production of self-monitoring subjects. This insight is especially relevant in the Iranian context, where citizens often adjust behaviour in anticipation of potential scrutiny from morality patrols, institutional authorities, or fellow citizens. The result is a form of governance that extends beyond direct state presence and becomes embedded within everyday social relations. Public space thus functions not simply as a setting for discipline but as one of its principal instruments.

The effectiveness of such systems depends not simply on coercion but on what Pierre Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence.¹⁰ Within authoritarian spatial orders, coercive norms often appear as propriety, common sense, or public morality rather than as political regulation. Individuals come to participate in their own governance because the categories through which they interpret the social world have already been shaped by dominant power relations. Spatial discipline therefore functions pedagogically. It teaches what can be seen, what can be shown, who belongs where, and which forms of appearance are legitimate. By the time deviation is recognised as illegal, it has often already been marked as socially improper.

The political nature of spatial order becomes particularly visible when states seek to inscribe ideology directly into the urban landscape. Street renaming after the 1979 Revolution provides one example. As Kashfi demonstrates, revolutionary authorities re-authored urban space by replacing pre-revolutionary names with references to revolutionary figures, anti-imperialist struggles, and religious symbolism. Yet such inscriptions are never fully secure. The continued vernacular use of older names by many residents illustrates that spatial authority depends upon continual repetition and everyday adoption.¹¹ Naming, like dress and comportment, must be repeatedly enacted if it is to stabilise particular understandings of political reality.

Gender functions as one of the most important organising principles within this spatial order. Regulations governing women's appearance and behaviour do not merely constrain individual conduct; they contribute to making social space legible. As James Scott argues, state power frequently relies upon simplification and legibility.¹² In the Iranian context, gendered visibility helps transform the complexity of urban life into recognisable patterns of conformity and deviation. As Martina Löw suggests, gender is reproduced through embodied spatial practices, while spatial arrangements themselves

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Sage Publications, 1977).

¹¹ Ehsan Kashfi, 'The Politics of Street Names: Reconstructing Iran's Collective Identity', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23 (2023), pp. 122–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12393>.

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990).

contribute to the production of gendered social order.¹³ The organisation of women-only sections on public transport, gender-segregated recreational facilities, and expectations surrounding public appearance all demonstrate how gender becomes embedded within the everyday production of space.¹⁴

The result is a form of authority that becomes infrastructural. Citizens learn to anticipate boundaries before confrontation occurs. Repression remains available, but it is often secondary to habituation. The city becomes a disciplined environment in which power operates quietly through repetition, expectation, and embodied routine. When this architecture is intensified through rituals, rallies, or public events, its underlying logic becomes more visible. The durability of authoritarian power therefore depends less on exceptional displays of force than on the continual reproduction of ordinary alignment.

II. Mechanisms of Spatial Control in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The architecture of power becomes most visible through the mechanisms that organise everyday conduct. Rather than relying exclusively on overt repression, these mechanisms shape how bodies appear, move, interact, and understand their place within public space. Their effectiveness lies less in continuous intervention than in the production of habits, expectations, and anticipatory forms of self-regulation. In the Iranian context, compulsory hijab, gendered spatial organisation, and mediated visibility function as interconnected mechanisms through which authority becomes embedded within everyday life.

A. Compulsory Hijab as Spatial Legibility

Compulsory hijab is often presented by state authorities as a religious obligation or moral duty. Yet its political significance extends beyond questions of faith. Within public space, hijab functions as a visual technology through which bodies become legible to systems of authority. It establishes a standardised code of appearance through which women can be read as compliant, ambiguous, or deviant. Regulation extends beyond the mere presence of a headscarf to encompass questions of colour, looseness, bodily proportion, and overall presentation. The result is a highly calibrated visual order in which public appearance becomes subject to continual interpretation.¹⁵

¹³ Löw, *Sociology of Space*.

¹⁴ Tyler and Cohen, 'Spaces that Matter', p. 180.

¹⁵ Fatemeh Shirazizadeh, *Compulsory Hijab in Iran: Functions and Impacts on Iranians' Daily Life during 44 Years of Islamic State* (unpublished master's thesis, Linnaeus University, 2024) <<https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1855172/FULLTEXT04.pdf>> [accessed 7 August 2026].

Because this calibration unfolds in public space, the street becomes a site of ongoing evaluation. Bodies are not simply present within urban space; they are read through it. A woman whose appearance falls within accepted norms may pass unnoticed, whereas deviations attract scrutiny from state authorities, bystanders, or both. As studies of Iranian urban life have demonstrated, gender regulation is embedded within broader socio-spatial arrangements that organise visibility, mobility, and belonging.¹⁶

This visual order shapes movement as much as appearance. Women frequently adjust routes, posture, pace, and patterns of interaction according to perceived levels of surveillance. Over time, these adjustments become embodied forms of knowledge. As Esmaeili and Shirazizadeh demonstrate, compulsory veiling often generates experiences of exclusion, stigma, and heightened self-awareness among women whose appearance does not fully conform to state expectations.¹⁷

Importantly, compulsory hijab rests upon a broader discourse that frames women's bodies as potentially disruptive if left unregulated. Within this framework, responsibility for maintaining public morality falls disproportionately upon women. Female visibility is regulated through assumptions about male desire and social order, producing an asymmetrical moral burden. At the same time, the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes 'proper' hijab ensures that compliance can never be fully secured. Women must continually interpret shifting boundaries of acceptability, encouraging forms of anticipatory self-regulation even in the absence of direct intervention.¹⁸

The durability of compulsory hijab therefore depends less upon constant policing than upon habituation. Punishments such as warnings, fines, and detentions function primarily as reinforcement within a broader system of ordinary compliance. In Bourdieusian terms, this constitutes a form of symbolic violence in which domination becomes misrecognised as propriety, morality, or common sense.

B. Gendered Movement and Spatial Sorting

Compulsory hijab operates alongside a broader system of gendered spatial organisation. Since the revolution, gender segregation has structured numerous aspects of public life, including transportation systems, educational institutions, sporting facilities, parks, and

¹⁶ Alireza Sadoughianzadeh, 'Gender and the City: The Socio-Spatial Organisation of Everyday Life in Iranian Cities', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 42.5 (2020), pp. 1–17.

¹⁷ Samar Haghighi Boroojeni and Asma Mehan, 'Experiences of Otherness: Young Women, Non-Conformity, and Urban Segregation in Public Spaces', *SSRN Working Paper* (2024), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4965290>.

¹⁸ Faezeh Esmaeili, *Refashioning the Hijab: Negotiating Public and Private Space in the Material and Virtual Worlds of Iranian Women* (unpublished master's thesis, Central European University, 2017) <https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2017/esmaeili_faezeh.htm> [accessed 7 August 2026].

recreational spaces. As Shahrokni demonstrates, these arrangements frequently operate through what she terms 'managed accommodation': rather than excluding women entirely, authorities create regulated forms of inclusion that shape how women may occupy public space.¹⁹ Such arrangements do more than separate bodies; women-only metro sections, gender-segregated university facilities, and designated recreational spaces organise expectations about appropriate proximity, interaction, and behaviour.²⁰ Public space becomes encoded with signals regarding who belongs where and under what conditions.

These practices also draw upon longer histories of spatial organisation. The distinction between *andaruni* (interior space) and *biruni* (exterior space) has historically structured visibility, access, and gender relations in Iranian society.²¹ Although contemporary urban life differs significantly from these earlier arrangements, traces of these spatial logics continue to shape contemporary understandings of propriety, privacy, and public presence.

Over time, repeated encounters with such boundaries become embodied. Individuals learn which forms of gathering attract attention, which behaviours remain tolerated, and which invite intervention. Spatial thresholds are carried within the body as practical knowledge. In my own experience after moving to the United Kingdom, I found myself instinctively searching for a women-only section on underground platforms before realising that no such division existed. Similarly, displays of public intimacy initially generated feelings of caution despite the absence of surveillance. Such experiences reveal how spatial discipline persists beyond the spaces in which it was originally learned.

This internalisation reduces the need for continuous enforcement. When individuals regulate themselves in anticipation of scrutiny, discipline becomes infrastructural, producing an orderly city whose inhabitants have learned to navigate invisible boundaries. The distinction between voluntary conformity and coerced compliance becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle.

C. Media as Spatial Extension and Amplification

If streets, schools, and public institutions function as disciplinary environments, media extend these environments beyond physical space by providing visual models

¹⁹ Nazanin Shahrokni, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (University of California Press, 2020).

²⁰ Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, 'Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces', *Cities*, 23.6 (2006), pp. 455–61 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2006.08.001>.

²¹ *Andaruni* and *biruni* refer to the private and public (or semi-public) domains of the traditional Iranian house. While *andaruni* literally means 'inside' and *biruni* means 'outside', the distinction concerns social access and visibility rather than simply interior and exterior physical space. The *andaruni* was reserved for family members and intimate guests, whereas the *biruni* functioned as a space for visitors and public interaction.

of acceptable public behaviour.²² Images of properly dressed citizens, orderly families, religious ceremonies, and patriotic gatherings establish templates through which ideal forms of public presence are repeatedly reproduced.

Media also function through selective visibility. Images of arrest, forced confession, or public punishment transform individual acts of deviation into widely circulating cautionary narratives. Visibility becomes double-edged: to appear publicly can signify recognition and belonging, but it can also expose individuals to discipline and sanction. Citizens learn not only to regulate their conduct in physical space but also to consider how that conduct may circulate as an image.

The growth of digital media has complicated these dynamics. As Graham and Khosravi argue, Iranian cyberspace has blurred traditional distinctions between public and private life, generating new forms of visibility and participation while simultaneously creating new opportunities for surveillance. Activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens increasingly use online spaces to circumvent restrictions imposed upon physical public space.²³ Digital environments therefore operate simultaneously as spaces of control and contestation.²⁴

This dynamic resonates strongly with Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses.²⁵ Media do not simply reflect social order; they participate in its reproduction by shaping how individuals understand themselves and others. Through repetition and selective visibility, mediated environments extend the architecture of power beyond the physical city. Across these mechanisms, a consistent pattern emerges. Spatial control operates through legibility, repetition, and anticipation. The architecture of power appears durable precisely because it is experienced as everyday life.

III. Disruption: Woman, Life, Freedom as Spatial Misalignment

While the previous section described how spatial discipline becomes habitual, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement revealed how fragile that habit can be. The uprising that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 can therefore be understood not simply as a political protest, but as a widespread disruption of embodied and spatial

²² Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses.

²³ Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi, 'Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 12.3 (2016), pp. 6–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890212204>.

²⁴ Abbasgholizadeh, Mahboubeh, "'To Do Something We Are Unable to Do in Iran': Cyberspace, the Public Sphere, and the Iranian Women's Movement', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39.4 (2014), pp. 831–839.

²⁵ Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses.

routines. Although the movement articulated explicit political demands, its significance also lay in how it unsettled the everyday practices through which authority is reproduced. As Alami and Hakiminejad argue, the movement transformed bodies into agents of spatial transgression, challenging the normative order embedded within everyday environments.²⁶

The Islamic Republic has long treated the body as a site of ideological inscription. Regulations governing dress, public intimacy, gender interaction, and bodily comportment operate not merely as legal restrictions but as techniques through which political authority becomes visible. Drawing on Bakhtin, one might understand this process as the production of a disciplined or 'imprisoned' body whose movements, appearance, and affects are organised according to predictable patterns. The regulated body becomes evidence that social order is functioning as intended.²⁷ The Woman, Life, Freedom movement disrupted this disciplining at its most visible point. Across cities including Tehran, Saqqez, Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz, women removed compulsory hijab in streets, universities, shopping centres, metro stations, and workplaces.

One particularly significant example occurred in universities during the autumn of 2022. Students at numerous campuses, including Sharif University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, and University of Tehran openly challenged gendered spatial norms by occupying common areas, refusing segregation practices, and staging mixed-gender gatherings. University cafeterias, ordinarily governed by established behavioural expectations, became sites of visible non-compliance. These actions were politically significant not because they seized institutions, but because they disrupted ordinary routines through which spatial order was reproduced. Spaces designed to produce predictable forms of interaction temporarily operated according to alternative rules of visibility and proximity, exposing how much public order depended upon the predictability of compliant bodies.

The disruption extended beyond dress. Mixed-gender gatherings emerged in spaces where segregation had long structured social interaction. University students deliberately crossed gendered boundaries in cafeterias and campuses. Public dancing appeared in streets and squares. Women publicly cut their hair and burned headscarves. These acts did not merely communicate opposition; they altered relationships between bodies in space. As Butler argues, assemblies of bodies can themselves constitute political

²⁶ Mahsa Alami Fariman and Ahmadrza Hakiminejad, 'Woman, Life, Freedom: Revolting Space Invaders in Iran', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28.5 (2024), pp. 1–22 (p. 3), doi:[10.1177/13675494241268101](https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494241268101).

²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984).

claims by challenging the norms governing appearance and visibility.²⁸ The political significance of these gatherings therefore lay not only in what participants demanded but in how they occupied space differently.

While the Woman, Life, Freedom movement was not a carnival in any literal sense, many of its practices shared this logic of inversion. Bodies that had been expected to remain disciplined became unpredictable. Actions that ordinarily attracted sanction became collective and visible. The boundaries separating compliance from transgression became unstable. The collective body exceeded the forms through which state authority sought to organise and contain it.

Digital circulation further intensified this disruption. Videos of unveiled women, student protests, public dancing, and acts of collective refusal travelled rapidly across social media platforms.²⁹ These images did not merely document resistance; they enabled its replication. A gesture performed in one neighbourhood could be observed, adapted, and repeated elsewhere. Although Graham and Khosravi focus primarily on diaspora and the blurring of public/private boundaries, their framework helps explain how digital space functioned as an alternative arena of political visibility during the uprising.³⁰ During the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, this dynamic became especially pronounced: online circulation created a parallel spatial infrastructure through which acts of refusal moved across geographical boundaries, linking protest inside Iran with transnational networks of witnessing and amplification.

Importantly, these actions were not purely symbolic. Participants reorganised space in practice. Streets, campuses, and transit environments temporarily operated according to altered expectations regarding visibility, proximity, and behaviour. Such moments demonstrated that the spatial order underpinning authoritarian authority depends upon continual enactment. Once ordinary routines became unreliable, the stability of that order became more difficult to sustain.

Understanding the movement through the lens of spatial misalignment helps clarify its broader significance. By interrupting routines that had come to appear natural, participants revealed how much authoritarian coherence depends upon repetition, predictability, and embodied compliance. The movement's most significant achievement was therefore not immediate transformation but revelation: the disciplined collective body upon which authority depends is neither natural nor inevitable. It must be continually performed.

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

²⁹ Fariman and Hakiminejad, *Revolting Space Invaders*, pp. 6–9.

³⁰ Graham and Khosravi, 'Reordering Public and Private', p. 10.

IV. Unbuilding Authority: Fragility, Exposure, and Contingency

The preceding sections have argued that the authority of the Islamic Republic is reproduced through everyday spatial routines that organise visibility, movement, and conduct. The question that remains is what occurs when these routines cease to function reliably. If authoritarian authority depends upon ordinary bodily alignment, disruption produces not an immediate alternative order but exposure. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement revealed the extent to which political authority depends upon continual enactment and everyday cooperation.

This exposure unfolded alongside intense repression. During the protests, thousands were arrested, hundreds were killed, and numerous protesters suffered permanent injuries, including the widely documented blinding of demonstrators through the use of shotgun pellets.³¹ Such acts sought to restore predictability by increasing the costs of deviation. Rather than replacing the existing architecture of power, repression reinforced it; as Gramsci suggests, coercion becomes most visible when consent and habituated compliance become unstable. Violence becomes necessary precisely because ordinary mechanisms of governance are no longer operating as effectively as before.³²

To 'unbuild' authority does not mean dismantling institutions but rendering visible the processes through which authority is constructed and maintained. What the Woman, Life, Freedom movement exposed was the extent to which spatial order depends upon repetition, legibility, and embodied participation. The state's response to this instability combined coercion with intensified performance. Alongside arrests and violence, authorities sought to restage images of unity and control. Pro-government rallies organised during and after the protests provide a revealing example. As Khani and Kadivar demonstrate, the Islamic Republic possesses extensive organisational infrastructures capable of mobilising supporters through religious institutions, universities, and state bureaucracies. During moments of crisis, these networks become mechanisms through which authority is publicly reasserted.³³

³¹ Iran Human Rights, 'Iran Protests 2022: Women Protester Eyes Intentionally and Systematically Targeted', 22 September 2023, <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6205/> [accessed 10 August 2026]; Edward Lempinen, 'More than 120 Protesters Blinded by Iranian Agents, Probe Confirms', *Berkeley News*, 21 March 2024, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2024/03/21/more-than-120-protesters-blinded-by-iranian-agents-probe-confirms/> [accessed 10 August 2026]; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'Two Iranian Protesters Who Were Partially Blinded By Security Forces Detained', 25 January 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-protesters-blinded-detained/32790380.html> [accessed 10 August 2026].

³² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 12–13, 57–58, 80.

³³ Saber Khani and Mohammad Ali Kadivar, 'Sanctuaries or Battlegrounds? State Penetration in Places of Worship, University Campuses, and State Bureaucracy for Pro-Government Mobilization: Evidence from Iran (2015–2019)', *Comparative Political Studies*, 57.10 (2023), pp. 1668–702.

The pro-government rally organised on 23 September 2022, one week after the death of Mahsa Amini, illustrates this process clearly. Held while anti-government demonstrations were spreading across the country, the rally sought to project the image of a unified and loyal public. Participants were assembled in central urban locations, national and religious symbols saturated the visual field, and state media circulated images emphasising density, order, and ideological commitment.³⁴ The significance of the event lay not only in the number of participants but in its performative function: it attempted to restore the appearance of consensus at a moment when everyday spatial compliance had become increasingly uncertain.

In such rallies, urban space is temporarily reorganised into what might be described as purified state space. Streets are selected for symbolic significance and logistical control. Routes are predetermined, access points are monitored, and movement is channelled into visible corridors designed to maximise the appearance of collective unity. Flags, portraits, banners, and choreographed slogans transform ordinary urban environments into highly managed symbolic landscapes. Participants become components within a carefully composed image whose purpose is not simply to demonstrate support for the regime but to project the existence of a coherent collective body.

These spectacles should not be understood as evidence of unquestioned authority. Rather, they reveal its vulnerability. Such performances function as what might be termed performative repair: attempts to restore the appearance of coherence when ordinary forms of alignment have become unreliable. Through selective inclusion and carefully managed visibility, these events temporarily suppress plurality and project an image of social consensus.

Schechner's concept of performance as 'restored behaviour' is useful here, as pro-government rallies operate through the repetition of already familiar scripts of loyalty: recognisable slogans, gestures, symbols, and choreographies sedimented through decades of ideological performance. Their power lies in recognisability, yet the need for continual restaging also reveals fragility: what must repeatedly be performed to appear stable is never fully secured.³⁵

Violence performs a similar function. Arrests, intimidation, and public punishment

³⁴ Patrick Wintour and agencies, 'Iran Marchers Call for Execution of Anti-Government Protesters', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/23/iran-reportedly-arrests-journalist-activist-mahsa-amini-protests> [accessed 12 August 2026]; Reuters, 'Iranian State-Organised Marchers Call for Execution of Protesters', 23 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-army-says-it-will-confront-enemies-protests-rage-2022-09-23/> [accessed 12 August 2026]; Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), 'راهپیمایی مردم سراسر کشور در محکومیت اغتشاشات اخیر', 23 September 2022, <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401070100188/> [accessed 12 August 2026].

³⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (Routledge, 2013).

seek to restore predictability by reminding citizens of the consequences of deviation. Coercion contains a paradox: the more visible force becomes, the more clearly it demonstrates that compliance is not automatic. Violence exposes what habituation ordinarily conceals: that authority depends upon ongoing participation and remains vulnerable to disruption.

To understand authority as maintained rather than possessed is therefore to recognise its fundamentally processual character. Power is not a static resource held securely by the state. It is an effect generated through continual spatial and social choreography. Unbuilding does not guarantee transformation. Existing structures may be reinforced, recalibrated, or theatrically amplified. Yet, exposure matters. Once the mechanisms through which authority is reproduced become visible, their inevitability becomes more difficult to sustain. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement demonstrated that authoritarian coherence is not inherent. It is produced through discipline, sustained through repetition, and periodically restored through performance. Its durability depends not upon permanence but upon continual enactment.

V. Conclusion: Architecture as Performative Power

This paper has argued that the authority of the Islamic Republic is sustained not only through coercion but also the organisation of everyday space. Architecture, understood here as a performative system, structures how bodies appear, move, and become legible in public. Through repetition and habituation, spatial norms become naturalised, making political order appear embedded in the environment itself. While grounded in the Iranian case, this perspective suggests a broader way of understanding authoritarian power: not simply as institutional domination, but as a spatial order sustained through everyday bodily alignment.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement disrupted this spatial order by introducing dispersed forms of misalignment that interfered with everyday legibility and revealed the contingent nature of authoritarian coherence. The state's intensified staging of unity during moments of crisis further demonstrates that authority must be continually reproduced; spectacle supplements discipline precisely when habituated alignment becomes unstable. Seeing architecture as performative therefore clarifies both domination and resistance. Authoritarian control is enacted through the management of visibility, movement, and spatial sorting. At the same time, it remains vulnerable to variation. Small deviations matter because they interfere with the routines that sustain legibility.

This analysis does not suggest that spatial disruption guarantees transformation. The architecture can be recalibrated, reinforced, and theatrically intensified. But recognising that authority is maintained rather than possessed alters how it is understood. Space is not merely the setting of politics; it is one of its primary instruments. To examine how bodies are trained to inhabit space, and how they sometimes inhabit it otherwise is to reveal that political power itself is an ongoing spatial performance.

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