Iran lawyer convicted after defending women protesters

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A prominent human rights lawyer in Iran who defended protesters against the Islamic Republic’s mandatory headscarves for women has been convicted and faces years in prison, an activist group said Wednesday.

The conviction of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who previously served three years in prison for her work, underlines the limits of challenging Iran’s theocracy as it faces economic pressure exacerbated by the U.S. pulling out of Tehran’s nuclear deal with world powers.

It also highlights the limits of Iran’s civilian government as well, as the administration of President Hassan Rouhani and others have signaled an easing of their concern over the mandatory hijab.

It shows “the insecurity the regime has to any peaceful challenge,” said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran, which reported Sotoudeh’s conviction. “It knows a large segment of the country . are fed up with the hijab laws.”

Sotoudeh, 55, was convicted in absentia after she refused to attend the trial before Tehran’s Revolutionary Court as she was unable to select her own counsel, Ghaemi said. The Revolutionary Court conducts closed-door hearings over alleged threats to Iran’s government.

The charges range from her membership to a human rights group to “encouraging corruption and prostitution.” That suggests her detention in part relates to her defense of women who protested the mandatory hijab.

Sotoudeh’s conviction was not immediately reported by Iranian state-run media. Iran’s mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The Center for Human Rights in Iran relied on information about Sotoudeh’s case provided by her husband Reza Khandan, who separately faces a six-year prison sentence over providing updates on her case on Facebook, Ghaemi said.

Sotoudeh received the awarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Union in 2012. Her previous clients also include Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi.

One of Sotoudeh’s clients in the hijab protests received a 20-year prison sentence, showing the sensitivity authorities felt about the case. Ghaemi said he believes Iran’s theocracy connects the hijab protests to the nationwide economic protests that happened around the same time at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

“It is part of the same pattern of wanting to put an end to any peaceful protest on the street,” he said.

The hijab and chador — the flowing, all-encompassing robe for women — have long been parts of Persian culture. They became political symbols in 1936, when Iran’s pro-Western ruler Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the garments amid his efforts to rapidly modernize Iran. The ban became a source of humiliation for some pious Muslim women in the country.

As the 1979 Islamic Revolution took hold, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered female civil servants to wear the chador. At first, thousands of women protested the decision in Tehran and Khomeini later said officials should not insult women who chose not to wear it — though he also called the chador “the flag of the revolution.”

The hijab and loose-fitting clothing later became mandatory for all women in Iran.

In Tehran today, some fashionable young women wear tighter clothes with a scarf loosely covering their head, technically meeting the requirements of the law while drawing the ire of conservatives.

In December 2017, Tehran’s police said they would no longer arrest women for not observing the Islamic dress code as video clips of women choosing not to wear hijabs and walking the streets with their heads uncovered spread across social media.

Protests followed, including a much-circulated image of a woman atop a junction box at an intersection of Tehran’s famed Enghelab, or “Revolution,” Street, waving her white hijab as if it was a flag.