

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SILENCE:

Team Melli's Powerful Protest Should Not Be Ignored

Lauren Mehrara



PC: Artin Bakhan from Unsplash

On the second day of the FIFA World Cup, the Iranian and English soccer teams lined up on the pitch ahead of their match. The Islamic Republic's national anthem blared through speakers in the stadium, but the Iranian soccer team, nicknamed Team Melli, stood silently in support of the protests raging back home, an act following large-scale criticism of the team after they met with President Ebrahim Raisi.¹ Team Melli's presence at the World Cup became even more political after their matches against Wales and the U.S., when they sang the Islamic Republic's nation anthem instead of remaining silent. Some Iranians

viewed this choice as traitorous to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement—which began when 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested for wearing her hijab “improperly,” sparking a revolutionary movement seeking basic rights for Iranian women—and denounced their support for Team Melli.⁷

Iranians are known for their deep affinity and appreciation for soccer, though the national team's presence in Qatar resulted in deeply divisive reactions from Iranians, both within Iran and throughout the diaspora. The Islamic Republic's attempts to use the national team's World Cup run as a uni-

“

Team Melli's decision to refuse to sing the anthem, especially as the Islamic Republic was using its World Cup presence to re-administer control over its protesting civilians, reflects their courage and should be understood by Americans as an act of rebellion.

”

fier and cause for nationalist sentiments in Iran actually resulted in the alienation of many fans. After Team Melli's loss to the U.S. ended their World Cup run, celebrations erupted in the streets of Iran; Mehran Samak, an Iranian man celebrating the U.S. victory in Bandar Anzali, was reportedly shot by Iranian security forces after honking his car horn.²

Although Team Melli has become emblematic of the Islamic Republic, their silent protest as a show of support for the people of their country and as an act of rebellion against the regime cannot be denied, especially under the threat of government backlash. Members of the national team were reportedly threatened with acts of torture against their family members back in Iran, forcing them to sing along to the anthem during later matches in the group stage.³

Despite these potential consequences, anti-government protesters expressed their desire for a more public and explicit form of

protest from the national team. The Iranian people wanted Team Melli to skip a match, kneel during the anthem, or mime cutting their hair with their fingers, as Iranian women have bravely chopped off their hair in protest of the regime's compulsory hijab laws.⁴

Team Melli's medium of protest mirrors Colin Kaepernick's kneeling demonstration during a San Francisco 49ers' game back in 2016. By visibly protesting against the U.S. treatment of Black Americans, Kaepernick incited a movement across a variety of sports and demographics of protestors, all while sparking controversy for choosing to protest during the national anthem. Many Americans were outraged by the perceived disrespect to their national anthem, with some claiming it was offensive to active and retired service members.⁵ Americans' understanding of the significance of such a protest during a national anthem should have allowed them to grant more attention

and respect to Team Melli during the World Cup. Team Melli's decision to refuse to sing the anthem, especially as the Islamic Republic was using its World Cup presence to re-administer control over its protesting civilians, reflects their courage and should be understood by Americans as an act of rebellion. Americans watched the controversy of Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest unfold, developing strong sentiments about whether or not it should be dismissed as unpatriotic performative action or recognized as a promotion of free speech. Reflecting on this shared understanding of the significance of national anthems, Team Melli's silent protest during the national anthem mirrors a similarly dire situation in Iran that requires greater international attention and response.

The danger that the Iranian National Team risked by participating in a protest should not be taken lightly. The Islamic Republic has brutalized numerous peaceful protestors, with the Human Rights Activists in Iran group estimating that about 450 people have been killed by Islamic Republic's security forces.⁶ The national team is not excused from these threats of violence, as they too were on the receiving end after their silent protest ahead of their match against Wales.³ Unlike Kaepernick, members of the Iranian National Team were not protected by their own government. They risked their own lives and their families' safety at the hands of a brutal authoritarian regime, threatened with torture, violence, and imprisonment if they made any kind of statement.³ The least we

can do as witnesses to their protests against the Iranian state is enunciate and emphasize our support for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

While there were a few mentions of Team Melli's protests in American media during the World Cup, headlines highlighting the oppressive acts of the Islamic Republic have since died down. I urge Americans to reflect on the chaos created by Kaepernick's protest during the national anthem and apply the same understanding to Team Melli's actions. Whether or not you agree with Colin Kaepernick's protest, the meaning and sanctity of the United States' national anthem is clear. Similarly, the Islamic Republic's national anthem holds great significance to the regime. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic installed "The National Anthem of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁸ Amid the current protests, the anthem has been used as propaganda by the regime, with more and more Iranians identifying with the old national anthem from the pre-revolutionary period—the "Imperial Anthem of Iran."

Team Melli's protests should not be ignored by international audiences, as any protest against a national anthem, a universally patriotic symbol, speaks to the severity of conditions and urgency of struggles within a country. As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement continues, international attention and support for the movement is crucial to help Iranians gain true freedom.