



Protesters in Tehran's Ekbatan district on March 14, 2023

Reform Activists In Iran Demand Referendum On Protest Anniversary

6 hours ago 3 minutes

Author: Iran International Newsroom

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More than 300 reform activists and figures in Iran have issued a statement demanding a referendum on the future political shape of the country.

Expressing support for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and those killed and imprisoned by the regime, **the activists pointed out**, "We repeatedly remind that the structure of religious authoritarianism not only undermines our national foundations but also propels us towards future upheavals and movements towards rebellion."

Two weeks before the anniversary of Iranian protests, the pro-reform individuals representing a more radical posture than former President Mohammad Khatami demanded a referendum to make "structural changes" in the Islamic Republic political system.

Iranians expect renewed protests on the anniversary of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement later this month, and the signatories of the statement, without explicitly calling for demonstrations, voiced support for young dissidents. "Now, we express our solidarity once again with all the families affected by the protests of the past year and hold the uprising of young people

seeking freedom and equality, especially the resistance of justice-seeking and freedom-loving women, in high regard," they emphasized.

"Therefore, structural change and a referendum to establish a government derived from the people's vote will remain a right that we continue to advocate so that Iran no longer suffers beyond what it already has," they said.

Protesters set fire to a motorcycle of the security forces as protests began on September 19, 2022

Iran's reformists, who advocate for a more humane version of the Islamic Republic as a form of government, have been driven out of power by hardliners in the past three years. Even moderate conservatives, such as former parliament speaker Ali Larijani, have been pushed into retirement from public office.

When nationwide protests began in September 2022, after the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, **reformists were initially ambivalent** toward the movement, which appeared to be more radical than simply demanding reforms within the Islamic Republic system. Prominent reformists adopted contradictory postures, with many rejecting regime change as the desirable goal of the protests.

On November 14, two reform figures, former President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and former vice president Massoumeh Ebtekar, broke their silence after more than 8 weeks of protests about the possible demise of the regime and voiced their opposition to dramatic changes in Iran.

Khatami revealed his opposition to regime change by saying that it was "neither possible nor desirable." Nonetheless, he warned that if the current state of affairs continues, the ground is paved for a looming social collapse.

The divergence of opinions among reformists sharpened in February when former prime minister and Green Movement Leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi issued a statement demanding "fundamental change" based on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and constitutional revisions. Mousavi, who has been under house arrest since 2011, said in his statement that the people have given up hope for reforms and they demand widespread change.

Although Mousavi did not openly call for regime change, the demands he put forward could lead to a new and more democratic political system. Ironically, his statement implicitly repeated what exiled Prince Reza Pahlavi has been saying for years, and other opposition figures were demanding during the protests. Mousavi was a pre-imminent Islamic revolutionary in the 1980s.

Khatami, as the symbolic father of the reform movement, nevertheless has maintained his more loyalist position, asking for reforms, while parliamentary elections in March put average reformist figures in a quandary of whether to announce their candidacy or boycott what, in most probability, will turn out to be another engineered vote by the ruling hardliners.

The 300 mostly reformist figures who have signed the latest statement appear to have adopted a position closer to Mousavi, by calling for a referendum.

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