

Opposition in the Iranian Diaspora and among Iranian Reformers: The Case of Mousavi

by [Majid Nikouei \(/experts/majid-nikouei\)](#)

Mar 3, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almardt-fy-aljalyt-alayranyt-wbyn-alaslahyyn-alayranyyn-qdyt-mwswy\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Majid Nikouei \(/experts/majid-nikouei\)](#)

Majid Nikouei is an Iranian lawyer and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Law, whose dissertation is on the politics of Iranian constitutionalism. He has published several peer review articles in European journals and is the author of a book in Farsi.



Brief Analysis

As an Iranian opposition coalesces in the diaspora, challenges loom on the horizon. How the diaspora approaches reformists inside Iran calling for a new constitution will help demonstrate just how cohesive Iran's disparate opposition groups can become.

In September 2022, the latest protest movement in Iran emerged without any leader or organized political party in the wake of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini's arrest by the country's infamous morality police and killing while in custody. These protests distinguished themselves from earlier demonstrations through their decentralized nature, as opposed to centralized, massive demonstrations more prone to a brutal crackdown by the armed forces. Protesters experienced a massive crackdown in the summer of 2009 after the reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi disputed the election, and again in November 2020, when an increase in fuel prices sparked demonstrations.

Alongside a decentralized method of protest, the most recent movement is distinct for its lack of organizational leadership. Characterized as a postmodern protest, the longevity of the movement was partly due to the government's inability to target a leader, although an increased number of casualties nevertheless cooled down the protests. Even so, many among the Iranian diaspora—which itself has been traditionally characterized by a fractured opposition—now maintain that the movement is in dire need of a leader who could negotiate with Western officials to boycott and isolate the regime internationally and possibly hinder any revival of the 2015 JCPOA.

Iran's former crown prince, Reza Pahlavi—who has lived in exile since the 1979 revolution—has in the past few months called for a coordinated front against the regime, saying that the movement should start a new phase. In a televised speech, he suggested that the movement needs to be led by someone who can claim to foreign officials that he is representing the Iranian people.

Subsequent to Pahlavi's speech, Royalists launched a campaign in mid-January to delegate him as a leader of Iran's

movement on an international scale. Pahlavi, along with Iranian activists Masih Alinejad and Nazanin Boniadi, then presented themselves as a unified opposition at the Munich Security Conference in mid-February, following a forum at Georgetown that brought together disparate opposition figures from the Iranian diaspora.

For his part, Pahlavi has insisted that he is not claiming any power for himself and that the proposed delegation is merely a conduit to transition from the Islamic Republic to a secular, democratic rule, promising to form a constituent assembly after the victory of the revolution. The delegation campaign, however, has not been as successful as its supporters likely expected. As of now, less than half a million people have signed the [online petition \(https://www.change.org/p/prince-reza-pahlavi-is-my-representative-c0fab7a1-2d92-4e8d-93c2-5f894a6e439b\)](https://www.change.org/p/prince-reza-pahlavi-is-my-representative-c0fab7a1-2d92-4e8d-93c2-5f894a6e439b), endowing Reza Pahlavi the power of attorney to lead this movement. The number of signatures represents less than one percent of the Iranian population.

Inside of Iran, several reformist leaders have also issued public statements over the past few weeks with messages related to those of the diaspora opposition. A few days before the February 11 anniversary of the Islamic Republic, Mousavi—who ran for the presidency in 2009 and became the leader of the Green movement that formed after the disputed presidential election—and the Iranian reformist and former President Mohammad Khatami issued similar remarks. Both warned that there is no sign of the ruling system’s desire for reform. Their statements, however, diverged in their proposed solutions. Mousavi proposed to hold a “free and healthy referendum on the need to change or draft a new constitution,” while Khatami demanded reforms based on the boundaries defined by the existing constitution.

Mousavi, now 81, is a notable figure in Iranian politics, having served as Iran’s Prime Minister for eight years in the 1980s. He led the new Islamic Republic with his Islamic leftist economic program through a gruesome eight-year war with Iraq, and served as a close confidant of Khomeini. During the years of his premiership, Iran left a poor human rights record—most notably in the bloody summer of 1988, when thousands of political prisoners were executed under the direct order of Khomeini. While much has been revealed about those dark days, no connection between Mousavi and those horrific events has been discovered so far, yet his position as PM during this period has led to calls for an investigation into Mousavi’s role during this period.

Mousavi would return to the political stage decades later during the 2009 presidential election, when he competed with the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, backed by the Supreme Leader Khamenei. In his presidential campaign, Mousavi called Khomeini’s period of leadership a “golden age,” but did not call for a return to that period, stating instead that “the regime must attempt to reform from within to achieve the goals of the 1979 revolution, i.e., justice, freedom and spirituality.” In 2009, Mousavi called for reform within the boundaries of the current Constitution, sided with the protesters, led the Green movement, and has in consequence been held under home arrest for more than a decade. The decades of his efforts to work within the system of the Islamic Republic provide the context from which he now maintains that its constitution is unsustainable and calls for a constituent assembly.

Many reformists from inside Iran, such as [Mostafa Taj Zadeh \(https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32256376.html\)](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/32256376.html) and [Abolfazl Ghadyani \(https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302132030\)](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302132030), have welcomed the current position of Mousavi. In contrast, some of the campaigners for Pahlavi’s proposed delegation sought to remind people that Mousavi was the premier of Khomeini, suggesting that he shall be brought before a court the day after the victory of the ongoing revolution. Masih Alinejad, a prominent women’s rights activist, shared this position during the Georgetown forum, while Pahlavi insisted in a more diplomatic statement on the multi-faceted nature of Iran and avoided triggering animosity by taking a stance against Mousavi.

However, the issue remains as to how the gap between those inside of Iran and the diaspora can be bridged, and the question of how other opposition leaders approach Mousavi will be key in answering this question. Mousavi—along with other self-styled leaders of the Iranian movement in and outside of the country—should of course be tried fairly

against any well-founded accusations in an independent court.

Yet activists should also remember that Mousavi's gradual change from an admirer of Khomeini to a reformist, and now to a revolutionist, is often the lived experience of many Iranians. There are many who sought to live Khomeini's idea of the guardianship of an Islamic jurist, and many who initially attempted to reform it from the inside before moving away from it altogether.

In addition, even the official results of the rigged election of 2009 indicated that Mousavi received about 14 million votes, signaling that his message had developed a powerful social base as a reformist. If Mousavi continues in his new messaging—suggesting a shared vision with other opposition figures—said opposition will be faced with the question of how they should respond to figures who have attempted to work within the Iranian system.

It is true that many of those who protested in Iran during the most recent movement are members of Generation Z or never bore affiliation with the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, the question of how the rest of the opposition movement will approach Mousavi will be a bellwether for how expansive this movement can become as Iranians who once supported the vision of the Islamic Republic become disillusioned. The entrenched nature of the Islamic Republic suggests that successfully fighting against it will require cooperation from all colors of the Iranian political carpet who seek to fundamentally alter the state—even including those who once praised Khomeini as Imam. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Formalizes Ties with the Taliban](#)

Mar 3, 2023



Aaron Y. Zelin

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-formalizes-ties-taliban\)](#)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

[Disaster Dynamics:](#)

Assessing Middle East Responses to the Turkish Earthquake and Other Destructive Events

Mar 3, 2023



Sarah Cahn,
Erik Yavorsky

[\(/policy-analysis/disaster-dynamics-assessing-middle-east-responses-turkish-earthquake-and-other\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iraq's Endless Electoral Law Debate

Mar 2, 2023



Feyzullah Tuna Aygün

(/policy-analysis/iraqs-endless-electoral-law-debate)

TOPICS

Iran's Domestic Affairs (/policy-analysis/irans-domestic-affairs)

Iran's Foreign Policy (/policy-analysis/irans-foreign-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)