

# Iran: unions and civil rights groups demand democracy and social justice

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**Increasing numbers of Iranians want a government of the people, not a monarchy or an Islamic theocracy.**



Women, life, freedom: protests against the oppression of Iranian women in Iran in Ottawa, Canada, September 2022. [Taymaz Valley/Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC BY-SA](#)

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Forty-four years after Iranians rose up against their hated monarch in February 1979, a group of 20 organisations engaged in long-term social and economic struggles – including labour unions, teachers, women’s groups and youth and student movements – [issued an ultimatum](#) to the government of the Islamic Republic.

The Charter of Minimum Demands of Independent Trade Union and Civil Organisations of Iran contains 12 demands concerning social justice, democracy and political reform. The charter is a protest:

against misogyny and gender-based discrimination, economic instability, the modern enslavement of the workforce, poverty, distress, class violence, and nationalist, centralist, and religious oppression. It is a revolution against any form of tyranny, whether it be under the pretext of religion or not; any form of tyranny that has been inflicted upon us, the majority of the people of Iran.

This charter represents the first organised and collective demand from within Iran since the explosion of unrest on Iranian streets after the [death of Mahsa Amini](#) at the hands of the morality police in September 2022.

The push for transformation inside Iran stands in stark contrast to the attempts of some exiled Iranians who want to [reimpose the pre-1979 monarchy](#).

The revolutionary movement that overthrew Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch of Iran, was a broad-based coalition of mostly urban working- and middle-class people. Supporters of the revolution were united by their opposition to the monarchy, but they were motivated by a range of ideologies: socialism, communism, liberalism, secularism, Islamism and nationalism.

These groups were also unified by their fierce opposition to Iran's foreign policy that left it subordinate to the west. Deeply etched in Iranians' collective memory is the fact that the monarchy had been reinstated in 1953 after a [coup d'etat](#) against the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. The coup had been orchestrated by the US and UK, who backed Mohammad Reza Shah throughout his brutal and oppressive reign, in return for control of Iran's oil industry.

By the 1970s, brutal state oppression was accompanied by [increasing inequality](#). Poor living and working conditions provoked unrest that was met with further repression and Iran's jails overflowed with political prisoners.

In January 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah and his family were [forced into exile](#) by a broad-based revolutionary coalition. But the unity that succeeded in ousting the hated regime proved to be shortlived and the theocratic Islamic Republic was established under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

But a large segment of Iranian society that had supported the revolution staunchly opposed the Islamic Republic from the beginning. This opposition has remained firm to the present day and is represented in huge numbers in the street protests that have rocked Iran since the death of Amini.

Amini, a Kurdish Iranian, was visiting relatives in Tehran when she was arrested by the morality police for violating the Islamic Republic's strict dress code. Her death, after reportedly being brutally beaten while in custody, [provoked outrage across the country](#).

In the protests that followed, many young women and men [have been killed](#) by security forces. Now the Islamic Republic faces the most serious challenge in its 44-year existence.

During the 1979 revolution, the hijab became a [symbol of resistance](#) to the Pahlavi monarchy and its commitment to "modernise" - in other words, westernise - Iranian society. Many women wore the headscarf as a protest against the imposition of western norms.

After the Islamic Republic took power the dress code for women became stricter. A month after the revolution - on March 8 1979, women launched [massive demonstrations](#) across Iran against what they saw as patriarchal oppression on the part of the new Islamic regime. However, the hijab became obligatory in 1983, by which time Iran was at war with Iraq.

So the hijab symbolises Iranian women's struggle against control by both the monarchy and the theocracy. The killing of Amini in September 2022 was the trigger for the current wave of protests, but they are a manifestation of long-lasting repressive gender relations. It is opposition to deeply rooted patriarchal relations that brought women and girls onto the streets in their hundreds of thousands across almost every city and town.

While women led the demonstrations, many men offered support. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom", which places women at the centre of the struggle, also calls for transformative changes in the economy ("life") and politics ("freedom"). Like in 1979, the current protests enjoy support from

diverse social groups. For many, this wave of demonstrations represents continuity with the 1979 revolution, and an opportunity to achieve the objectives that were undermined by the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

## Progressive revolution

The 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 revolution marked a significant moment for which many Iranians have been longing. The [new charter](#) calls for “an end to the formation of any kind of power from above and to start a social, progressive, and human revolution for the liberation of peoples from any form of tyranny, discrimination, colonisation, oppression, and dictatorship”.

The demands are broad-ranging. They include the freedom of all political prisoners, freedom of belief and expression, equality between men and women and improved wages and conditions for all workers. They demand the free participation of people in democracy through local and national councils and the redistribution of wealth and resources.

The charter provides the first draft of a vision for a new Iran. Its proclamation on the anniversary of the 1979 revolution makes a historical connection to that struggle and its anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorial sentiments. The demands put forward demonstrate that Iranians have a clear vision for their future. And it shows that it is time for the reactionary forces outside Iran to accept that Iranian people can indeed alter their society from within.

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I have been educated in Iran (University of Tehran), India (Jawaharlal Nehru University), South Africa (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Germany (University of Freiburg). I worked at Humboldt University of Berlin for several years before moving to the UK. My books include: *Social Movements in Iran: Environmentalism and Civil Society* (Author, Routledge 2012), *Understanding Southern Social Movements* (Editor, Routledge 2016), *Contemporary Megaprojects: Organization, Vision and Resistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Co-editor, Berghahn 2021) and *Marxism, Religion and Emancipatory Politics* (Co-editor, Palgrave-Macmillan 2022). I am currently president of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Social Classes and Social Movements.

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