

Thousands rally across Australia in support of Indigenous reform



A sticker of the Australian Aboriginal Flag along with the word 'RESPECT' is pictured on a structure at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, a site of protest since 1972, in Canberra, Australia [File: Loren Elliott/Reuters]?

Canberra, July 2 (RHC)-- Thousands of people have rallied in cities and towns across Australia to back a campaign to recognise the country's Indigenous people in the constitution in advance of a referendum later this year.

The gatherings on Sunday, organised by the Yes23 campaign, were part of a nationwide “day of action” to rally the public after a recent dip in support for the constitutional change. The proposal, which will be put up for a referendum between October and December, seeks to establish an advisory body – the Indigenous Voice to Parliament – to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a direct say in policies that affect them.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s centre-left Labor government backs the change, while the opposition Liberal-National conservatives urge a “No” vote.

On Sunday, an Australian Council of Social Service tweet showed Sydney rally attendees in T-shirts with the words “Vote Yes” and caps with the words “The Uluru Statement”, referring to a key document that calls for an Indigenous Voice.

Yes23, the group behind more than 25 rallies nationwide, said the crowd in Sydney was about 3,000 and that it expected up to 25,000 people to participate in total.

“These community events are opportunities for people to come together and gain valuable information about the importance of a successful referendum later this year,” Yes23 campaign director Dean Parkin said in a statement.

The day of action comes after support for the referendum appeared to be ebbing according to a poll last month, which showed “No” ahead for the first time, 51 percent to 49 percent.

Fred Pascoe, director of the Gulf Regional Economic Aboriginal Trust, told Al Jazeera the referendum was critical for Indigenous rights in Australia. He noted that Indigenous people, who make up about 3.2 percent of Australia’s population of almost 26 million and who were not granted full voting rights until the 1960s, are not even mentioned in the country’s constitution.

“So first, this referendum is essential to change that,” he said from the town of Normanton in Queensland state. “Secondly, we don’t just need another political body. We need people from the grassroots, everyday people, to get in there, to have a say, to have a voice for government, because no one knows better than the people who are intimately involved with an issue. So, we’ve come up with a solutions that we’ve seen work, that government has not taken on board.”

Opponents, including some Indigenous people, have said the proposal lacks detail and will divide Australians.

Al Jazeera’s Sarah Clarke, reporting from Sydney, said critics believe the constitutional change is a distraction from achieving practical outcomes. “Critics are saying that there are bigger issues that need to be addressed and prioritised,” she said. “That being, education, health, safety and domestic violence within these communities.”

The Yes23 campaign meanwhile said the dip in polls did not reflect the reality on the ground. “You don’t necessarily see it on television. You don’t see it in the newspapers, but there are conversations happening around kitchen tables, in sporting clubs, in workplaces around the country,” Yes23 director Rachel Perkins told ABC television on Sunday. “And that’s just going to grow.”

Getting constitutional change is difficult in Australia. The government must secure a double majority in the referendum, which means more than 50 percent of voters nationwide, and a majority of voters in at least four of the six states must back the change.

In the past, there have been 44 proposals for constitutional change in 19 referendums, and only eight of these have passed. Most notably, a 1967 referendum on Indigenous rights saw a record Yes vote.

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