

Despite gridlock, immigration advocates keep up fight for reform

By Carrie Dann and Andrew Rafferty, NBC News

Amid the political gloom of a government shutdown and the threat of default if a budget compromise is not brokered soon, immigration reform advocates are hardly basking in the momentum they enjoyed this summer. But backers of a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants are keeping up the public fight in spite of a bleak outlook for legislative action this year.

Thousands descended on the National Mall on Tuesday, chanting "Si se puede" -- "Yes we can" -- as mostly Democratic lawmakers told them not to give up the push for reform. Despite the gridlocked political climate, many in attendance remained optimistic, but frustrated.

"I'm not sure when it's going to, but I think it's going to happen. We have momentum, like a snowball that is rolling," said Juan Frias, a Fairfax, Va., resident originally from Mexico. "But we know this will not be easy."

"Congress needs to get their act together," said Rebecca Diaz, a Puerto Rican who moved to Washington, D.C., one year ago. "I'm going to fight for immigration reform right now. Not in a year, not in five months, right now," she said.

[That fight meant a trip to jail for some, including some lawmakers.](#) Eight House members outspoken about the immigration issue -- including Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., and civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga. -- were among those arrested for civil disobedience during a march after the organized rally and charged with "crowding, obstructing, and incommoding" near the Capitol.

With the ongoing shutdown, the rally's location on the National Mall was itself the subject of controversy. A week after World War II Honor Flight participants made national headlines for fighting for access to the shuttered national memorial honoring their service, critics said that immigration rights ralliers -- including some who might be undocumented immigrants -- should not be able to use space that would otherwise be closed because of the funding lapse.

The National Park Service granted the host organizations access to the area for "First Amendment activities."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., commended the park service for "bending over backwards" to ensure the rally took place on the National Mall, directly between the Washington Monument and the Capitol.

Legislative progress on a comprehensive immigration bill -- once seen as on track to being signed by the president after a bipartisan Senate vote to advance it -- has all but halted. House Speaker

John Boehner declined to put the Senate-passed bill up for a vote, waiting instead on “piecemeal” legislation from GOP House members. A years-in-the-making effort by a coalition of bipartisan House members to create their own comprehensive bill gradually crumbled.

Attendees hold signs calling for immigration reform during a rally in support of immigration reform, in Washington, on October 8, 2013 in Washington, DC. Last week, House Democrats introduced their own immigration reform bill.

But lawmakers who spoke at the rally urged the crowd to continue their chorus of "Si se puede."

"It has taken a while and we have had some moments, shall we say. But I thank you for subscribing to the idea: Don't agonize, organize," Pelosi said. "Let us act without further delay, let's get a vote on the floor ... because the time for immigration reform is now."

Lewis told reporters, "We cannot rest, we cannot be satisfied until we have comprehensive immigration reform."

Some in the crowd were pushing for reform so that they could be reunited with family members who were deported or unable to legally immigrate into the United States. Others admitted that they were in the country illegally, and feared each day they would be caught and deported.

A 23-year-old man, who declined to give his name, said he overstayed his visa when he came to the U.S. for school at age 14.

"I'm here because I need a green card," he said. "No one is here to help me. I came because I want to work hard and learn"

And like many Americans assigning blame for problems in Washington, those gathered Tuesday pointed the finger at Congress as the reason no comprehensive legislation has been passed.

"I am very hopeful. But I know congress is very polarized so it will be difficult for reform to pass," said Yasmin Garcia, a Mexican native now living in Washington, D.C.

"It's the Congress fault," she said.

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