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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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08.10.2019

Death toll in Iraq protests tops 105

Scattered protests continued on Sunday as a tense calm settled over much of Baghdad following five days of mass demonstrations that left at least 105 dead and more than 6,100 wounded as of early Sunday.

These are the figures released by Iraq's Interior Ministry, and the real number of casualties is no doubt far higher. A combination of police, soldiers, counter-terrorism operatives and militiamen have unleashed live ammunition, rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon against unarmed demonstrators, in their great majority young unemployed workers and university graduates. As the protests grew larger, snipers were deployed on rooftops in the Iraqi capital to pick off demonstrators.

Protesters arrested by security forces have been beaten and humiliated, while at least in one case, a young activist couple was shot to death by a masked death squad.

By late Sunday night, another eight protesters were reportedly gunned down in eastern Baghdad's impoverished Sadr City district, where Shia guerrillas battled US troops more than a decade ago.

In an attempt to quell the growing mass uprising, the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi lifted a curfew it had imposed and announced a patchwork of minor reforms, offering the equivalent of \$65 million to aid the unemployed, in the form of a pittance in monthly allowances and a youth job training program. It also promised a minor land distribution in southern Iraq and the construction of 100,000 housing units for the poor.

These promises have been met with overwhelming skepticism. Given the past record of the post-US invasion regimes, whatever money is promised is expected to go into the pockets of the corrupt Iraqi bourgeoisie and the ruling political parties and their cronies.

The intensity of the last five days of state violence is a direct manifestation of the crisis and instability of the regime headed by Abdul Mahdi, which has sought to rule by means of a sectarian appeal to Iraq's Shia majority, while attempting to balance between Washington and Tehran.

This government sits atop a social powder keg. Iraqi society has been ravaged by three decades of US wars, economic blockades and occupation, whose net effect has been the decimation of what was once the most advanced social infrastructure—including public education and healthcare as well as popular living standards—in the Middle East.

What has replaced the authoritarian Ba'athist regime overthrown by the 2003 US invasion, with its leader Saddam Hussein put to death, was not the “democracy” promised by Washington, but a kleptocracy run by a collection of sectarian-based parties which came to power on the backs of American tanks.

Abdul Mahdi is representative of this ruling clique, named finance minister in the first puppet government installed by the US occupation after a political career that saw him evolve from Ba'athism to the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party, to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a pro-Iranian exile militia, and finally Washington's stooge.

The mass uprising has centered in Baghdad and the heartland of the majority Shia population in southern Iraq, and its fury has been directed at both the government and the Shia sectarian parties.

Iraq's Interior Minister Major General Saad Maan reported at a press conference the demonstrations had seen the burning down of 51 public buildings and eight political party headquarters.

The demonstrations began last Tuesday with a fairly small and peaceful protest that had been organized on social media to demand jobs and an end to corruption. It had antecedents in rolling protests by university graduates who have staged sit-ins outside government ministries demanding jobs and protesting the failure of the Iraqi state to provide any employment path for those who had earned degrees.

Unemployment for younger workers is estimated at over 25 percent, and an estimated 800,000 Iraqis enter the labor market each year with few jobs available.

While Iraq's oil production has nearly doubled over the past decade, and petroleum export earnings have risen to between six and seven billion dollars a month, this wealth has done nothing to lift the conditions of the vast majority of Iraq's 40 million people, at least a quarter of whom live in extreme poverty, surviving on barely \$2 a day. Social inequality in the country has risen to unprecedented levels.

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It was the violent repression of the initial protest that brought tens of thousands into the streets, with the demonstrations growing in response to the rising death toll.

Whether Abdul Mahdi's year-old government will survive the mass protests is far from clear. The leader of the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, Muqtada al-Sadr, has called for the government's dissolution and new elections.

Al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army battled US troops during the American occupation that followed the 2003 invasion, had previously backed Abdul Mahdi. While Sadr's movement had organized earlier protests, it has not backed the current uprising.

Sadr had previously promoted Iraqi nationalism in opposition to Iranian influence. But last month he made an appearance alongside Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in Tehran. He has since toned down his anti-Iranian rhetoric.

The pro-government media in Iran has attributed the mass uprising in Iraq to a US-Israeli-Saudi plot, citing the use of social media in promoting the initial demonstrations. Since then Iraq has been placed under an internet blackout.

Significantly, the demonstrations have been largely confined to predominantly Shia areas of Iraq, with expressions of support in the Sunni-populated areas of Anbar Province and Mosul being limited to small protests and statements on social media. These areas are still recovering from the catastrophic destruction inflicted by Washington's so-called "war on ISIS", and there are fears among Sunnis that if they were to rise up they would be denounced as terrorists and subjected to murderous repression.

There is no doubt that anti-Iranian outlets in both the Arab Gulf states and the US have attempted to exploit the upheavals, circulating unsubstantiated allegations that members of the security forces suppressing the protests had been heard speaking Arabic with Farsi accents.

The outbreak of the demonstrations has also been attributed in part to the sacking of Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, a popular deputy commander of Iraq's counterterrorism forces who had clashed with Iranian-backed Shia militia elements within the Iraqi military. There are reports, however, that the friction was caused by the financial corruption associated with these forces.

The real concerns of the bourgeois-clerical regime in Tehran have been made clear by the pro-government media's repeated comparisons of the Iraqi upheavals to the mass working class protests that swept Iran in 2017-18.

For its part, Washington has shown no enthusiasm for the mass protests in Iraq, with the State Department remaining silent since issuing a perfunctory declaration asserting the right to protest in the abstract, while deploring "violence" by the demonstrators who were being slaughtered.

Meanwhile, the US corporate mass media, which devotes extensive coverage to every act of police repression in Russia, Hong Kong and Venezuela, has largely ignored the mass killings in Baghdad and southern Iraq.

Washington has no immediate interest in regime change in Iraq, where it has at least 5,000 troops deployed. While it seeks to combat Iranian influence in the government, even as it prepares for war against Iran, the US has no viable political force in Iraq to replace the collection of corrupt parties that it brought to power.

7 October 2018