

Protests spread throughout Iraq

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Protests spread to cities throughout Iraq yesterday, as demonstrators demanded jobs and social services and voiced their opposition to the various corrupt local authorities supported by the US-backed occupation regime. These are the latest of several days of protests, inspired by the mass revolutionary struggles that toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

Preparations are reportedly underway for a “Revolution of Iraqi Rage” rally in the capital, Baghdad, on February 25. This highlights growing mass opposition to the atrocious social conditions created by the occupation regime set up by Washington after the US invasion in 2003. These include lack of electricity and clean water, mass joblessness, and surging increases in the price of food—as well as the dictatorial conduct of the new rulers placed in power by Washington.

There were protests yesterday in the majority-Kurdish areas of northern Iraq, in both Suleimaniyah and Kirkuk, which resulted in the single bloodiest incident in the wave of protests sweeping the Middle East.

In Suleimaniyah, health officials stated that nine people were killed and over 47 injured when Kurdish *peshmerga* forces fired into a crowd of at least 3,000 people, protesting at the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani. Demonstrators were protesting KDP corruption, and the lack of jobs and basic services. They chanted “Government resign,” “Work for the unemployed” and “The corrupt must face justice.”

AFP reported that during the evening, security forces took positions in Suleimaniyah’s streets, around the headquarters of the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The PUK is the party of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.

In Kirkuk roughly 400 people protested outside of government buildings, calling for better services for

widows and orphans. A local reporter told the *New York Times* that they chanted, “We want justice. Where are our rights? Protect the orphans from the thieves. We are hungry in a country of oil.”

There were also protests in majority-Shiite southern Iraq. In Basra, a port and oil hub that is Iraq’s second-largest city, 600 protesters held a sit-in and set up tents outside government buildings guarded by police.

Demonstrators pledged to remain outside the buildings until their demands—including plans to reliably provide electricity and clean drinking water—were met. They also called for the dismissal of local officials. Mohammed Ali Jasim told AP, “We are demanding that the Basra governor be fired because he has not done anything good for Basra.”

In Nasir, a small town north of the provincial capital of Nassiriyah, protesters rallied outside the municipal building, demanding jobs and public services. They threw stones at the building and set it on fire amid clashes with police. Authorities in Nasir imposed a curfew and arrested several people.

In Kut, a city of 850,000 people in Wasit province, protesters rallied and set up tents outside the government building, demanding meetings with provincial and central government authorities. They called for price subsidies for food staples, regular provision of electricity, and jobs.

Protesters also chanted slogans opposing the US occupation and the national authorities: “Down with [Prime Minister Nouri] al-Maliki, down with thieves.” Referring to the years since the 2003 US invasion, one banner read: “Eight years of suffering, where are your promises?”

Yesterday’s protests came after violent confrontations the day before in Kut, when three people were killed and 27 injured in clashes with police, as protesters demanded the resignation of Wasit Governor Latif Hamad al-Tarfa. Al-Tarfa reportedly fled through

the back door with his bodyguards as opponents took over the building.

Protesters yesterday mocked al-Tarfa by writing “governor” on the side of a donkey. They called for al-Tarfa’s dismissal, accusing him of having stolen state funds. Akel Salah, a 27-year-old protester, told the *New York Times*: “We will stay here in the street until the governor walks out. Everything in this province is bad. No gas. No electricity. No jobs. No nothing.”

Salah also reported that several protesters had been arrested, including his brother, and that no news of them was available. He said, “I am calling his phone, but it is switched off. His wife and son are going crazy.”

These demonstrations follow a number of similar protests in other parts of the country in recent days. On Tuesday, according to reports on Iraq’s *Al-Sumaria* television stations, protesters rallied in Fallujah—a city that the US military repeatedly assaulted in 2003 and 2004, using chemical weapons including white phosphorus. Their demands included jobs, the provision of social services, the dismissal of foreigners from the Iraqi government, and the resignation of local officials.

One banner in Fallujah protested the bitter Shiite-Sunni sectarian tensions that were exacerbated in US-occupied Iraq: “No for sectarianism, yes for unity, down with al-Maliki’s government.” Another read, “No restriction on freedom of expression, no for random detentions and raids, no for corrupted politicians and thieves.” And a third: “We demand better basic services: electricity, oil, and improving food rations.”

There were also demonstrations in Sadr City, the massive Shiite slum in Baghdad. Reports stated that marchers there shouted, “No to corrupt government” and “We voted for you, where are your promises?”



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