

Iraqi officials fear national “day of rage” protest

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As anti-government protests spread throughout Iraq, leading Iraqi politicians tried to limit preparations for today’s “day of rage” protests in US-occupied Iraq.

Popular protests, inspired by the wave of revolutionary struggles throughout the Middle East, are demanding jobs, food, an end to electricity shortages, and an end to government corruption. They have hit the entire breadth of Iraq, from Suleimaniyah and Kirkuk in the Kurdish-majority north, to the capital, Baghdad, and to several cities including Basra in the majority-Shiite Arab south (See “Protests spread throughout Iraq”).

Yesterday there were protests against police in the northern city of Halabja, whose mayor, Goran Adham, reported one policeman killed and three injured. He did not cite estimates for casualties among protesters.

Demonstrators have been marching every day in Suleimaniyah to demand political change since the fatal shootings of two protesters last Thursday. The city is under lock down at night. One placard carried by protesters on Tuesday—when several thousand rallied in the downtown and at Suleimaniyah University—read, “This is a country of hungry people. They are not afraid of tanks.”

A group of protesters staging a peaceful sit-in in Tahrir Square in Baghdad said they were attacked by a group of knife-wielding thugs on Monday, as soldiers looked on, after the protesters defied an order by high-ranking Iraqi Army officers to leave. The Baghdad Operations Command denied any attack had taken place, however. The Iraqi army has taken over Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, setting up checkpoints and checking the identities of everyone on the square.

Amid expectations that today’s national protest could be quite powerful, Iraqi officials have tried to defuse popular anger. Baghdad municipal officials promised

they would consider “essential decisions to fire executive staff.”

Parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi also suspended the Iraqi parliament for one week on Monday, saying lawmakers should visit their constituencies and listen to their grievances. Maliki said he would personally take a 50 percent pay cut, and his government said it would delay the purchase of 18 US jets to use the funds to purchase food for the poor.

The main focus of Iraqi politicians has been to discourage and clamp down on protests, however. In a speech, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said, “I call on you to be cautious and careful and stay away” from the protests. He blamed the protests on “Saddamists, terrorists, and Al Qaeda,” saying: “Frankly speaking, they are planning to take advantage of tomorrow’s demonstrations for their own benefit.”

Muntazer al-Zaidi—the reporter imprisoned and tortured in 2008 for throwing a shoe at then-US President George W. Bush and calling him a “dog” at a press conference—was detained yesterday, shortly after his return to Iraq from Lebanon. He was arrested in the Adhamiya district of Baghdad, where he was speaking to encourage participation in the protest.

On Wednesday, Iraqi army personnel raided offices of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) in Baghdad, confiscating files and computers. The top Iraqi military spokesman in Baghdad, Qassim al-Moussawi, would only tell the AP news service that the troops raiding the office were “carrying out an order.”

The JFO’s director, Ziad al-Ajeeli, has made statements in favor of today’s protest. He told the *Washington Post*, “Previously, people thought you had to change things with weapons. Now, we want to change things through our ideas.”

Shiite religious officials have come out in opposition

to the protests. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a leading Shiite cleric, claimed to support protesters' demands, but then attempted to discourage them, claiming the protests could be "exploited."

Moktada al-Sadr, the cleric and leader of the Mahdi Army, returned from Iran on Wednesday and issued a statement calling for the protests to be delayed six months. This was an about-face from his position last week, where he called upon 1 million of his supporters to protest peacefully. Sadrist official Hazem Araj said that Sadr might organize an "informal referendum" on the quality of Iraqi public services.

Apart from a two-week visit to Iraq last month, al-Sadr has stayed in Iran for the last three years.

Ruling circles hope the opposition from the Shiite establishment will prevent the protests from having a political impact. Zaid al-Ali, a UN legal adviser, told the *New York Times*: "This was a huge break for Maliki. There is a lot of fear among politicians in Iraq about what is going to happen on Friday. Without a lot of Shiite participation, a lot of air will be taken out of the protests."

On al-Sadr, whose supporters fought US forces in the early years of the occupation, al-Ali said: "It's almost impossible to know why Sadr would help Maliki like this, but his party is now part of the government and he likely doesn't want to see the government fall or be weakened by this."

The al-Iraqiya party—a secular party that is now in government, though it presents itself as the main political rival to al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party—issued a statement supporting the protests. It declared its "solidarity with the just demands of the demonstrators," warning against the use of violence by security forces.

The central issue facing the protests—the US occupation—cannot be addressed by the existing parties, however, as they themselves have emerged from it. Indeed, the US government is the main enabler of Iraq's corrupt local officialdom. With 47,000 troops in Iraq and command of its air space, it still controls the country.

As Iraq's oilfields are largely held by Western energy firms, moreover, there are not enough resources to solve its social problems. (See "Big oil cashes in on Iraq slaughter"). This has produced the absurd and tragic situation where the country with the world's

second-largest oil reserves can only provide three or four hours of electricity per day to large parts of its territory.

There are initial signs that opposition to the illegal US invasion of Iraq is emerging openly as a political issue in the country. The Baghdad city government issued a statement calling for \$1 billion in damages from the US military, citing damage to sewer systems, sidewalks, and other city infrastructure by blast walls erected by US forces. They did not, however, call for compensation for damages caused by US bombings.



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