

Mass protests in Iraq's southern provinces

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Thousands took part in mass demonstrations in southern Iraq over the weekend against the intolerable economic conditions that prevail 15 years after the US-led war for regime change that toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein and collapsed the Iraqi state. Iraqi officials have desperately sought to quell the unprecedented protests through a combination of conciliatory rhetoric and state repression, with security forces injuring dozens and killing three demonstrators over the first week.

The protests began in Basra City on July 8 when security forces fired on a demonstration of youth protesting lack of employment and essential services, including water and electricity. The Iraqi security forces killed one of the demonstrators, sparking widespread outrage in the community.

The demonstrations have continued every day since, with crowds of hundreds of protesters blocking traffic, attempting to seize oil fields and storming and setting fire to government buildings, as well as those belonging to Shia political parties, whom many blame for the lack of any significant improvement in living standards since the fall of the Ba'athist regime.

The protests erupting in the mainly Shiite South are directed against the Shiite-dominated, US-backed government. They are driven not by sectarian sentiments, but by class issues.

Protesters are calling for an end to pervasive graft, unemployment, and grossly inadequate public services, all of which have become defining features of Iraqi society since the US invasion and occupation. In particular, regular power outages and a lack of clean drinking water make life miserable for the city's mostly working-class inhabitants during the sweltering summer months. The unreliability of electricity in southern Iraq was exacerbated this year by a drought, which significantly reduced power production at the nation's hydroelectric dams, and by Iran's large

reduction in the amount of electricity it provides to Iraq as a result of a dispute regarding payment.

Basra Province is by far the country's most oil-rich region. Its oil exports account for 95 percent of annual revenue for the Iraqi government, making its security a key priority for the regime.

As a result, the protests have produced significant apprehension on the part of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has responded to the protests with token promises to improve water and electricity services, combined with a series of repressive measures to quash the protests before they can pose a threat to the survival of the government.

State media reported that Abadi has ordered the Iraqi Army's Ninth Division as well as Iraq's notorious Counter-Terrorism Service commandos to defend oil fields in Basra. The government has also severely restricted Internet access in an attempt to disrupt the coordination of further demonstrations.

The demonstrations nonetheless gained further momentum over the weekend. On Friday, demonstrators blocked access to the commodities port of Umm Qasr, while protests expanded to the cities of Amara, Nasiriya and Najaf, where a group of several hundred protesters stormed the airport and brought air traffic to a halt. Security forces deployed to the airport shot and killed two more demonstrators, bringing the total to at least three protesters killed over the first week. Protests were also held in Baghdad and the holy city of Karbala over the weekend.

These protests, unlike many in the past—such as the anticorruption protests called by the nationalist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr last year, which ended in the storming and occupation of the heavily fortified “Green Zone” surrounding government buildings and diplomatic missions in the heart of Baghdad—are fundamentally of a class rather than sectarian character.

Workers in the southern provinces are entering into

struggle independently of and in opposition to the bourgeois Shia parties and putting forward their own class demands—jobs, an end to graft, and the provision of basic human needs. They are striving to break free of the divisive sectarian framework promoted by the United States for the purpose of pacifying the Iraqi population through the timeworn tactic of “divide and rule.”

The working-class character of this movement is in continuity with the struggle waged in January by Iranian workers against President Rouhani’s austerity budget. That movement employed a series of strikes and mass demonstrations that caught Iran’s bourgeois clerical regime unprepared. Only by means of massive state repression and the tireless efforts of various monarchist and reactionary forces was the regime able to contain and bring an end to that struggle.



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