Iraqi regime responds to mass protests with brutal crackdown

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The Iraqi police and security services have killed at least 250 people and injured thousands more in a brutal crackdown against the mass protests that first erupted earlier this month. In Karbala, 18 people were killed and 122 injured on Monday night. Three people died in Nasiriya as a result of injuries sustained earlier in the month.

The strikes and protests against Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government, which are uniting workers across religious affiliation despite the confusion deliberately stoked by Iraq's divisive political system, are the largest in decades. Centered in the country's majority Shia population, the ostensible base of the ruling parties that make up Mahdi's fragile coalition, the protests have shaken the regime to its core.

They reflect the enormous anger over endemic poverty, rampant unemployment, the lack of the most basic services and the systemic corruption that has pervaded Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation and the bitter sectarian conflicts instigated by Washington as part of its divide-and-rule strategy, which have devastated the country.

The demonstrations in Iraq are part of a global upsurge of social struggles that have seen mass demonstrations in Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon and other countries.

Abdul Mahdi has made no attempt to meet the protesters' demands for jobs, better living conditions and an end to corruption. He has dismissed their grievances with contempt, saying there is no "magic solution."

Yet Iraq is OPEC's second-biggest oil producer. It has the fifth-largest crude oil reserves in the world and last year took in more than $100 billion in oil revenues. But far from benefiting the Iraqi people, the cash went straight into the hands of international oil companies and their bribed hirelings in Iraq's political and business circles. According to Transparency International, Iraq is the world's 12th most corrupt state.

Mahdi imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and closed down the internet and social media in a bid to stop the protests from spreading. In addition, he ordered the deployment of heavily armed soldiers, members of Iraq's elite counterterrorism squads and riot police to stop demonstrators from marching on Tahrir Square in downtown Baghdad and on the Green Zone, the heavily fortified center of the Iraqi government and location of the US and other Western embassies, as well as the numerous military contractors that prop up the regime.

Snipers were positioned on rooftops to pick off protesters and masked death squads were deployed to go to the homes of known activists and assassinate them. Thousands are believed to have been injured as a result of the security forces' use of live ammunition, rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon.

According to an Iraqi government committee that investigated the crackdown during the first week of October, 149 civilians were killed as a result of the security forces' use of excessive force and live fire, with more than 100 deaths caused by shots to the head or chest. While it held senior commanders responsible, it stopped short of blaming the prime minister and other top government officials, claiming there had been no order to shoot.

But the government's brutality served only to fuel the popular anger. In the impoverished Shia neighborhoods of Sadr City, part of the Baghdad conurbation where more than a decade ago militias confronted American troops, crowds set fire to both government buildings and the offices of the Shia-based parties that support the government.

The initial wave of protests stopped for two weeks for the Shia religious festival of Arbaeen before resuming last Friday, when demonstrators in various parts of the country demanded the government's resignation. "We're here to bring down the whole government, to weed them all out," protesters shouted. They added, "We don't want a single one of them. Not [Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed] Halbousi, not [Prime Minister Adel] Abdul Mahdi. We want to bring down the regime."

The protests spread to the Shia-populated southern provinces, with some of the young people voicing their opposition to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's leading Shia cleric, who urged protesters and security forces to show "restraint" and warned that there would be "chaos" if violence resumed.

As well as marching on Baghdad's Green Zone, demonstrators targeted the headquarters of various militias across southern Iraq, including that of the Badr militia in Amarra and the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in Diwaniyah. The headquarters of the Sayyidd al-Shuhada in Nasiriya was also set on fire—a significant development given how strong the group is in that area. Demonstrators also attacked the political parties

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and the government buildings they control, burning the Dawa Party headquarters in Diwaniya and the al-Hikma Party headquarters in Samawa, as well as provincial governorate buildings in the southern provinces of Dhi Qar, Qadisiya and Wasit.

Once again, the government imposed a curfew, closed the internet, turned off the electricity in Tahrir Square, warned school and university students not to join the protests and gave the green light to the security forces to attack the demonstrators. According to Iraq's High Commission for Human Rights, 63 demonstrators were killed on Friday and Saturday and more than 2,500 demonstrators and security forces were injured, largely by parastatal forces. The photos and videos of some of those killed and injured are horrific.

But the protests have continued this week. Students—some 40 percent of Iraqis were born after the 2003 US-led invasion of the country—defied the government and joined the thousands demonstrating against the government and calling for its resignation, despite the security forces' use of tear gas against them. In Baghdad, soldiers were seen beating up high school students.

Activists in Baghdad occupied Tahrir Square throughout Monday night in defiance of the curfew. Reuters news agency reported one protester as saying, "No, we will stay. They have now declared a curfew and severe punishments for anyone not going to work, this is how they fight us. We will stay here until the last day, even if there are a thousand martyrs."

On Monday, the first cracks in Mahdi's fragile coalition appeared, as Muqtada al-Sadr, the cleric who backs parliament's largest bloc and was instrumental in bringing Mahdi's coalition to power, called for early elections.

These protests reflect Iraqis' anger over the truly terrible conditions they have been forced to endure. Despite the $1 trillion in oil revenue generated since 2005, the level of poverty is appalling. According to World Bank figures, around seven million of Iraq's 38 million people live below the poverty line, and youth unemployment is 25 percent, undoubtedly a huge underestimate.

According to the World Food Program, 53 percent of Iraqis are vulnerable to food insecurity, while a massive 66 percent of the two million internally displaced as a result of the civil war against ISIS are susceptible to food insecurity. Malnutrition is rife.

Life expectancy has fallen to 58.7 years for men and 62.9 years for women as a result of the destruction of Iraq's health care system following years of economic sanctions in the 1990s and the occupation and civil war that followed the US-led invasion.

Most households no longer have access to a regular water supply, but face constant interruptions and have to resort to tanker trucks or open wells.

Housing conditions are truly shocking. The US war and its aftermath destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes and displaced millions of people. Many are living in breeze block shacks with corrugated iron roofs. Fifty one percent of Iraqi households are crowded, some with as many as 10 people living in one home.

The protests are part of a broader upsurge in the class struggle that is taking place all over the world and testifies to the primacy of class over ethnicity, nationality and religion. The Middle East and North Africa have witnessed strikes and demonstrations in Algeria, Sudan, Jordan and Egypt, and most recently, Lebanon.

Thirteen days of mass protests against the government's corruption and economic measures that have impoverished the working class have brought Lebanon to a standstill. Many roads are blocked, and businesses, schools and universities are closed. The banks have remained shut throughout, fearing a currency devaluation and mass withdrawals. Riad Salameh, the director of the Central Bank of Lebanon, speaking on CNN television, said that without a political solution, the Lebanese economy was just days away from collapsing. Hours later, Prime Minister Saad Hariri handed in his resignation to President Michel Aoun.

These struggles expose once again the political bankruptcy of the national bourgeoisie, not only in Iraq but throughout the Arab world, which has proven to be organically incapable of resolving any of the democratic and social demands of the Arab masses or establishing any genuine independence from imperialism.

These demands can be won only by unleashing the enormous power of the international working class. This can be developed through the establishment of popular assemblies and workers' committees in all the oil installations and workplaces throughout the country, aimed at mobilizing the independent strength of the working class in a struggle against the world capitalist system and for socialism.

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