

Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government uses deadly force against wages protests

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The security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq fired on demonstrators protesting over unpaid wages, killing eight people, and injuring 65 more. One member of the security forces was also killed.

Families of some of the dead claimed their relatives were shot while walking through crowds of protestors.

The protests began on December 3 when thousands of public sector workers in Iraq's semi-autonomous KRG, took to the streets of Sulaimani, the capital city of Sulaimaniya province, to demand their unpaid wages. Around 1.2 million workers have not been paid for much of this year as the KRG has run out of cash. Budget disputes with the federal government in Baghdad and Iraq's economic crisis have been compounded by the fall in oil prices and the pandemic-related downturn. The protesters were met with water cannon, rubber bullets and tear gas.

Since then, the anti-government protests have escalated, spreading to other towns in the Sulaimaniya province as well as to Halabja province, amid widespread anger over unpaid salaries, unemployment, poverty, a lack of basic services, electricity, water and fuel shortages, and government corruption. On Sunday, protesters in Said Sadiq torched the offices of the two main Kurdish political parties as well as the mayor's office.

The KRG said it would not allow "unlicensed" protests and that it would initiate legal proceedings against those who damaged government property. It has restricted access to the internet and suspended for one week regional TV station NRT's broadcasts, raiding its office in Sulaimani in an effort to prevent the protests escalating further. On Wednesday, the authorities in Sulaimaniya banned all vehicular movement for 24 hours.

These latest protests follow similar demonstrations over unpaid wages and pay cuts in November when the government used tear gas to disperse the demonstrations.

In August, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which controls the western areas of the KRG, deployed large numbers of security forces to suppress demonstrations in Erbil and Duhok provinces, resulting in numerous injuries,

particularly in the city of Zakho.

Security forces also attacked and arrested journalists and shut down a major TV channel, while the broadcasters and newspapers associated with the two ruling parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union Party (PUK)—barely covered the clashes. These two rival and corrupt mafia-like gangs that fought each other in the mid-1990s run the KRG as their personal fiefdoms with scant tolerance for dissent, criticism and the niceties of bourgeois democracy. Other powerful figures have their own private militias to maintain their own corrupt profiteering.

The KDP, which rules over the KRG's 5.1 million population, has been led by the Barzani family ever since its creation seven decades ago, with Nechirvan Barzani holding the presidency and Masrour Barzani, the son of the previous president, holding the premiership. The Barzani clan has monopolized most commercial activities in the region, amassing a huge fortune.

In all, more than 280 people were arrested and subjected to abuse. *Al-Jazeera* cited the Rights and Freedoms Advocacy Committee, an NGO, as stating, "Among those arrested were "teachers, civil servants, journalists and human rights activists, some of whom have been subjected to physical and psychological torture, prolonged solitary confinement, and denied access to legal aid and visitations."

It is part of a vicious crackdown on reporting. According to the Metro Center for Journalist Rights, based in the PUK-dominated Sulaymaniyah province, there have been 98 violations against media organisations and journalists in the KRG in the first six months of 2020. Only the media organisations linked to the two main parties have been spared. The KRG is also introducing legislation clamping down on digital media.

The latest Human Rights Watch report describes KRG rule as being "the same as other parts of Iraq for outspoken people" and states, "Kurdish authorities are continuing to use vaguely worded laws to intimidate and silence journalists, activists, and other dissenting voices."

On Monday, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani called

for patience and blamed the crisis on the federal government, claiming that Baghdad had failed to transfer four monthly payments of \$270 million to Erbil, the KRG's capital. He called on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi "to instruct the federal Finance Ministry to release the region's funds." On Wednesday, Barzani said, "The protests that started in Sulaimani and Halabja were peaceful. However, they were taken advantage of."

Facing a catastrophic financial crisis with the collapse in oil demand and prices, the Iraqi government teeters on the brink of insolvency. The financial transfers to the KRG, whose relations with Baghdad deteriorated after its failed bid to create an independent Kurdish state in 2017, are bound up with the political deadlock in Iraq's parliament that have prevented the agreement of the 2021 budget law. This is now unlikely to be approved before the new year. While al-Kadhimi had sought parliament's approval to borrow \$34 billion, parliament sanctioned just \$10 billion, barely enough to cover the wage bill for Iraq's 4 million public employees, who have seen their salaries delayed for nearly two months, until the end of the year.

This has further strained relations with the KRG, where three out of four workers are paid by the regional government.

The \$270 million which the federal government in Baghdad pays to the KRG monthly is a reduction from an earlier agreement under which it paid \$400 million. The cut was enacted after the KRG began to export its oil independently. New legislation requiring the KRG to remit to Baghdad the revenues from its direct oil sales to Turkey in return for its share of the federal budget prompted Kurdish legislators to storm out of parliament in anger.

In addition to the economic crisis, the KRG's Peshmerga forces have clashed with Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party's (PKK) fighters, of whom some 5,000 fighters are stationed in the KRG, with the potential to ignite an all-out conflict. PKK forces recently sabotaged the KRG's pipeline to Turkey, suspending oil exports, as part of its 35-year insurgency against Turkish rule. The conflict has led to the deaths of some 40,000 people, the destruction of 4,000 villages and the forcible displacement of up to one million people. These clashes take place in the wake of Turkey's cross-border counter-PKK operations including airstrikes, which Baghdad views as an infringement on Iraq's sovereignty.

US officials hypocritically expressed their concern over the crackdown on protesters during a meeting with KRG leaders in Erbil on Wednesday. Washington has had a long relationship with the Barzani clan's Kurdish Democratic Party, having backed the KRG with military and financial aid and used the KRG's Peshmerga as shock troops in

fighting the Islamic State in Iraq.

The Pentagon has established a major base near Erbil and is reportedly setting up other semi-permanent bases near the Iranian border, making the KRG a center of US imperialist operations in the region. Washington is also anxious to prevent any further unrest in Iraq, which has been rocked by anti-government protests. Barzani has sent a delegation to Baghdad to discuss the crisis.

For its part, the Kurdish working class increasingly views the KRG's ruling cliques as willing tools of Washington and its allies, whose support enables the KDP and PUK to quash public dissent and opposition to their plunder and exploitation.

Iraq has become a key political battleground in the Trump administration's drive to establish unfettered US domination over the world's principal oil-exporting region and its preparations for a military confrontation with Iran. This in turn is bound up with Washington's build-up for "great power" confrontation with China—attempting to use military force to establish a chokehold over the energy resources upon which the Chinese economy depends.

These developments take place amid a new and even more dangerous phase of the US's war preparations and provocations against Iran, including the dispatch of US B-52 bombers to the Persian Gulf for second time in three weeks with the potential for mass casualties among the tens of thousands of US troops deployed in the region. This could provide President Donald Trump, who has refused to concede Joe Biden's victory in the recent presidential elections, with a pretext for realizing his threats to impose martial law and upend the transfer of power.



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