

Demonstrator killed in Iran's water crisis protests

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A man was killed during protests that have raged since Thursday over severe water shortages in towns and cities in the oil-rich Khuzestan province in the southwest of Iran.

The protests have including in the capital Ahvaz, with the largest taking place in Susangerd, a city of 120,000 near the Iran-Iraq border. Demonstrators, furious at provincial governor Qasem Soleimani Dashtaki claiming Friday that videos showing demonstrations the previous night were fake, shouted, “Impossible to accept humiliation” and “No to forced migration”.

The ruling elite is acutely conscious of the significance of these protests in the country's economic powerhouse, where thousands of contract workers in Iran's oil industry have been on strike for weeks, demanding better wages and working conditions in the southern gas fields and some refineries in the big cities and winning growing support elsewhere. It was the oil workers' strike that erupted in late 1978, amid a wave of mass protests by workers, students, and the urban poor, that broke the back of the blood-soaked US-backed regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi. The government has refrained thus far from taking its usual heavy-handed approach to protests, lethal repression, intimidation and harsh sentences, instead attempting to play them down.

The protests follow the worst drought in 50 years amid growing public anger over water and electricity shortages in Iran's sweltering summer. This has been exacerbated by the poverty fueled by sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports imposed by the US Trump administration after unilaterally abandoning the 2015 nuclear deal three years ago, and the crashing of the value of Iran's currency. No less a factor is the government's corruption, pro-rich policies, and mismanagement of the pandemic.

While officials claim the protester was hit accidentally by people firing in the air—with acting county governor Omid Sabripour saying fire was aimed at both protesters

and the security forces—oppositionists accused the security forces of opening fire on the demonstrations. Unverified video clips posted online show people setting fire to tyres to block roads, with one clip showing security forces in helmets and camouflage fatigues following a crowd. The man was one of Iran's Sunni Arab community in the town of Shadegan, in Khuzestan province bordering southern Iraq.

Last week, there were reports that villagers in Khuzestan and elsewhere have been forced to buy water from tankers for personal needs, with officials acknowledging that 8,000 villages have severe or serious water shortage and rely on tanker deliveries.

On Friday, President Hassan Rouhani sent a delegation to the region to address protesters' grievances. The water crisis, caused by a 50 percent reduction in rainfall in this past year and climate change that has amplified the intensity and frequency of droughts, has devastated agriculture and livestock farming and led to the shutdown of hydroelectric power plants and electricity blackouts as electricity consumption to power air conditioning surged.

In addition, Iran sought to attract the high-energy demanding cryptocurrency mining by massive computer farms, offering cheap power, courtesy of government subsidies, and requiring miners to sell their Bitcoins to the central bank to pay for imports of authorised goods, attracting miners, particularly from China, to Iran. In May, Rouhani was forced to ban the industry, much of which is unlicensed, for four months due to power shortages.

Earlier this month, protests erupted over power outages that have caused traffic chaos, rotting food, the shutdown of online schooling, disruption of examinations and deaths in intensive care units in hospitals. Videos appear to show crowds in several cities, with some people shouting, “Death to the dictator” and “Death to Khamenei,” referring to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah

Ali Khamenei. Another video shows a woman complaining about the blackouts and corruption at a government office in the northern city of Gorgan, demanding that her comments be conveyed to “higher-ups like Mr Rouhani” and shouting, “The only thing you have done is forcing hijab on us.”

In a televised interview, Rouhani apologised for the blackouts, blaming it on the severe drought and high demand and called on people “to co-operate [by cutting their electricity use],” while promising to resolve the problems.

His pledge has provoked bitter refutations and recriminations among Iran’s political elite. The Rouhani administration, which will make way in August for the government of recently elected President Ebrahim Raisi, a member of Iran’s principalist, conservative faction that was shoe-horned into power by Iran’s Supreme Leader, has been largely invisible. The government has announced that the talks in Vienna, aimed at restoring the nuclear deal with US and the major powers, will not restart before Raisi takes office.

A spokesperson for the power industry warned that Iran’s power production capacity was 11GW short of demand and that a “looming heat wave” could make the situation worse. The parliamentary leader of Khuzestan’s deputies charged that the government’s years-long diversion of the province’s water was causing the shortage and warned, “Now Khuzestan’s security is at stake because of human errors and inappropriate decisions.”

The protests take place amid a deepening economic crisis. According to the International Monetary Fund, after a 13.4 percent rise in GDP in 2017 as the nuclear deal took effect, Iran’s economy shrank by 6.8 percent in 2018 and 6 percent in 2019, after Washington reimposed sanctions as well as new ones on Iran as part of its maximum pressure campaign to topple the regime. Since then, GDP has grown by 1.5 percent in 2020, as Iran was one of the few countries to grow during the pandemic, and is expected to expand by 2.5 percent this year.

Iran’s venal ruling elite pushed the burden onto the working class as Iran’s currency plummeted and inflation soared. Widely believed to be underestimated in official statistics, June’s inflation rate at 43 percent, the second highest since 1979, broke a 26-year record.

The impact on working people has been catastrophic, with a 70 percent hike in the cost of basic food items in the last year, above that which a recent report called a “critical level,” with no significant improvement expected

soon. Last week’s report of the Statistics and Strategic Data Center of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare reported a 120 percent increase in the cost of chicken and butter and an 80 percent hike in prices of cooking oil, milk, sugar, imported rice, and eggs. Rents have risen by up to 34 percent in the last year and clothing by 50 percent. Around 40 percent of the population, more than 32 million people, live below the poverty line, according to the state-run daily *Hamshahri*.

Workers’ economic plight has been exacerbated by the pandemic as the government has enriched the financial elite. More than 87,000 people have died, the largest number in the Middle East, although government statistics show excess deaths are more than double this number. Cases are on the rise again, with the highly contagious Delta variant spreading through the country’s southern and southeastern provinces.

Less than 2 percent of the 84 million population have received both required vaccine doses, as sanctions have made it impossible to obtain Western medicines. While Iran has imported some Russian and Chinese vaccines, joined the COVAX programme for vaccine sharing and developed three of its own vaccines, doses are in short supply, with the government promising mass vaccinations will start in September.

The current wave of protests, along with the oil workers’ strike, to defend their living standards and secure basic democratic rights take place amid similar protests in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon, as well as in South Africa and Brazil. Indeed, these social and economic conditions are replicated across the Middle East and Africa.

Iranian workers can only advance their struggle by asserting their political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and their political representatives in both the Islamic Republic’s bourgeois-clerical establishment and the pro-imperialist opposition forces within and outside Iran, bourgeois parties seeking to capitalize on the unrest for their own interests. Iranian workers must unite with workers and the oppressed across the Middle East and around the world against capitalism, imperialism, and war, and for socialism.



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