

Protests continue in Iran in face of government repression

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Students and young people have protested in more than 200 towns and cities across Iran. The demonstrations and rallies have been ongoing for two months, despite the brutal crackdown ordered by the government of President Ebrahim Raisi, with solidarity protests taking place in Europe, the United States and parts of the Middle East.

Initial protests were sparked by the death of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at the hands of the regime's morality police after her arrest for "improperly" wearing a hijab. Fueled by widespread anger over social and economic conditions, including high unemployment, and the corruption and monopolization of political power by the Shia clerical establishment, protests that started in the Kurdish provinces soon morphed into wider, anti-government rallies throughout the country.

However, having made no appeal to the working class, the largely leaderless youth movement has attracted little active support from workers, apart from brief strikes by teachers and oil workers last month, leaving them vulnerable to government repression.

Appalling living conditions are to a large extent the result of the brutal sanctions regime imposed by Washington after the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned the 2015 nuclear accords. It was little short of a declaration of war on Iran. While the incoming Biden administration claimed it wanted to restore the deal, the talks have been stalled by the ever-increasing demands from Washington, coming to a halt in September. Iran's oil exports have plummeted, slashing the country's most important source of income, while its currency has fallen to its lowest-ever level against the dollar.

Amid provocative military threats and actions, President Joe Biden has sought to establish an anti-Iran

alliance of the Gulf states, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Israel. Tel Aviv, acting as Washington's attack dog, has stepped up its aggressive air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, even as it carries out acts of sabotage within Iran.

According to official figures, inflation in Iran is running at 54 percent and food prices have risen by more than 100 percent since President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August last year. In May of this year, his government began removing subsidies worth up to \$15 billion on the import of basic foods, medicine, and animal feed, although it said there would be some cash assistance to some families. Iran's youth—two thirds of Iran's 85 million people are under 30 years of age—are some of the worst affected. Some 27 percent are without work, with even higher figures in the ethnic minority areas of Sistan-Baluchestan and Kurdistan.

As well as the protests over Amini's death, there have been demonstrations in Sistan-Baluchestan, near the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, over the alleged rape of a teenage girl by a police officer. An "unprecedented" crackdown on the Baluchis by the security forces in the provincial capital of Zahedan in late September killed at least 82 people.

While the protests have been smaller than those of 2018 to 2019, they have lasted longer than any since the movement that brought down the Shah's regime, with demonstrators calling for the downfall of the ruling establishment and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They have been met with far greater violence by the authorities, with leading figures calling for mass trials and harsh sentencing, including the death penalty.

Security forces have attacked unarmed protesters with live fire, beaten them with batons and thrown tear gas

at funerals, on the streets and at universities and high schools, killing 318 protesters, including at least 49 children, according to the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). 38 members of the security forces have been killed.

The funerals for the dead have sparked further protests, with young people shouting slogans such as “Death to the dictator,” and “Women, life, freedom!”

Memorial rallies, held to commemorate the 40th day of mourning for victims in at least 10 cities, were broken up by armed riot police.

At least 14,000 people have been arrested, including 392 students. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said that 54 journalists had been arrested, a dozen of whom were released on bail. The government has severely limited internet access and communications.

On Sunday, legislators called on Iran’s judiciary to take “decisive” action against protesters, whose actions they referred to as “riots” and “seditions,” saying that the US was targeting Iran to effect regime change. The US and its allies had “openly entered the scene,” providing finance and encouraging “thugs” to attack security forces, leading to dozens of deaths. They called for the judiciary to punish the attackers with equal consequences, taken to mean the call for the death penalty.

Some leading figures have called for dialogue with the protesters, with Grand Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamadani urging the government to listen to the people’s demands. The former speaker of the Majlis, now a senior adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Ali Larijani said, “the government in Tehran badly needs to listen to the other side.” He advised the government to consider the fact that “Perhaps the other side is also partly right.” Nevertheless, he added that Iran’s “enemies” were behind the uprising, saying, “The enemy has targeted Iran as a whole... In a neighboring country, the Americans are openly telling Iran’s counter-revolutionaries to be active and exert pressure on Tehran.”

Tehran has repeatedly blamed the US and Israel for orchestrating the protests and accused western intelligence agencies, including the CIA, of instigating the violence, fueling ethnic and religious tensions and collaborating with exiled Kurdish groups. Last week, in a joint statement with the Islamic Revolutionary

Guards, Iran’s intelligence service accused two female Iranian journalists who publicised Amini’s death of being foreign agents trained by the US to create chaos, leading to their arrest and detention by the authorities.

Iran has also accused Saudi Arabia of fueling the unrest via its funding of its Persian language network, Iran International, that has reported the protests extensively.

The major powers have lost no time in denouncing Tehran for “violently suppressing peaceful protesters.”

At the end of last month, the Biden administration unveiled a new tranche of sanctions targeting commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a provincial governor and other Iranian officials involved in Tehran’s crackdown. Canada, the UK and the European Union followed suit.

Washington has also given internet software companies permission to bypass sanctions to provide SpaceX’s satellite internet service Starlink to the Iranian market to evade state restrictions on the internet. It has tried to remove Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and to form an investigative body under the auspices of the UN’s human rights council. Iran’s UN ambassador, Amir Saeid Iravani, denounced this, telling reporters that its objective was “clearly to interfere in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state” in violation of the UN Charter.

The US and European imperialist powers have also seized on reports that Russia is using drones supplied by Tehran in its invasion of Ukraine, potentially opening up another front on the war.

Speaking at an election campaign rally in California last Thursday, Biden promised to “free Iran,” adding that the protesters would “free themselves pretty soon.”



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