

Anti-government protests continue in Iran despite mounting repression

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Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime—led by religious conservative President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei—was the target of a three-day “national strike,” from Monday through Wednesday of this week.

Iranian state censorship and the western media's visceral hostility to the Iranian regime, which the imperialist powers view as an obstacle to their unbridled domination of the Middle East, make it difficult to gauge precisely the extent of the protests and their social composition.

That said, it is clear, the denials of the regime notwithstanding, that the “strike” had a significant, albeit varied, impact across all or at least most of Iran.

The most significant economic impact of the protest was the widespread closure of shops. But there were also several significant worker strikes, possibly the largest direct worker participation in the now almost three-month long wave of anti-government protests.

The fissures within the Islamic Republic's ruling elite also appear to be deepening, with suggestions from some elements of the regime that the much-hated morality police has been or should be disbanded, and calls from others for more ruthless repression of the anti-government protests.

The “strike” was timed to climax Wednesday on Student Day, an annual event honouring three students killed by the Shah's regime in 1953, shortly after he was restored to power in a CIA-orchestrated coup against the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh.

Industrial workers, including several thousand at the Isfahan Steel Company, Sanandaj Petrochemical workers, and Sepahan Cement works, and bus drivers in Mashhad joined part or all of the three-day protest. Workers at the Daroogar pharmaceutical plant held protests over the non-payment of their wages for the last four months.

The most widespread participation in the anti-government protests was in Iran's Kurdish areas. They have borne the brunt of the government crackdown on the unrest that began in mid-September, after 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, detained by the morality police for wearing the hijab “improperly,” died in police custody.

Outside the Kurdish areas the anti-government agitation has been centered on university campuses, although several recent protests have seen shutdowns of bazaar shops, once a pillar of the regime.

Last month, Ayatollah Khamenei warned against what he claimed was the threat that the imperialist powers and their Middle East allies would seek to incite worker unrest. His remarks indicate the regime's extreme nervousness that the protests and the growing fissures within the ruling elite could open the door to an eruption of mass working class opposition.

University campuses across the country appear to have been the site of significant protests this week. At a university in the city of Qom,

home to many of Iran's most prestigious religious seminaries, some students reportedly chanted, “We don't want a corrupt system, we don't want a murderer as our guest.” Interrupting a speech by Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, a close ally and deputy of President Ebrahim Raisi, they shouted, “This is the year of blood, the Supreme Leader will be toppled.”

The state media sought to downplay the shop closures and strikes, claiming most shop owners “ignored” the strike call and “intimidation” by protest supporters. For his part, Iran's police chief Hossein Ashtari said the police had succeeded in keeping the protesters away from their “evil and empty” goals. He warned protesters, “Security forces will no longer exercise restraint” and praised his officers for their efforts to counter “seditionists.”

The protests that started in the Kurdish provinces last September after Amini's police custody killing soon morphed into wider, anti-government rallies throughout the country, testifying to the widespread anger over unemployment, social inequality and the soaring cost of living. The terrible plight of Iran's workers and rural poor stems principally from the brutal sanctions regime imposed by Washington after the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned the 2015 Iran nuclear accords. But the systemic corruption and monopolization of the country's economic resources by the Shia clerical establishment and its big business backers have exacerbated the widespread poverty.

There is also widespread anger over the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. The refusal to allow the import of western-produced vaccines led to higher death rates, under conditions where the sanctions regime has severely impacted the availability of medicines and other pharmaceutical products.

The government's decision to end its subsidized exchange rate and subsidy cuts have led to an unprecedented increase in food prices, making it almost impossible for poorer workers to put food on the table. Meanwhile, the surge in the price of agricultural commodities, including fertilizers—largely driven by the US/NATO-led war on Russia—amid a widespread drought and the government's mismanagement of Iran's water resources have had a devastating impact on the rural masses.

Mounting economic pressures have also severely impacted broad sections of the middle class. Some of the more privileged middle class layers support elements within the bourgeoisie and clerical political establishment that favour a rapprochement with the imperialist powers and/or imperialist-aligned emigré opposition groups.

While many protesters have chanted “Women, life, freedom!” and called for reforms, particularly to Iran's strict dress code for women, others have declared “Death to the dictator” and called for an end to

the country's clerical regime. The protests and rallies, although not the largest, have lasted longer than those that rocked the country in late December-January 2018-2019 and November 2019.

This week's national shutdown was called in response to a lethal crackdown by police and security forces. This has included intimidating protesters' families and closing cemeteries to families trying to commemorate the deaths of those killed in the protests.

At the end of October, the authorities announced they would hold public trials in the capital, Tehran, for 1,000 people, over the protests, marking the government's first major judicial action aimed at quashing dissent. The state-run IRNA news agency accused them of "subversive actions," including assaulting security personnel and setting fire to public property. Some, it said, would be charged with collaborating with foreign governments, in line with the government's frequent assertions that the protest movement is being fomented by the US and Israel.

The police have been under orders from the judiciary to "identify and put to trial" those promoting the shop "strikes," amid threats to "seal" striking shops, remove their owners' licenses to trade and confiscate their property. Masoud Setayeshi, a spokesperson, declared that "the judiciary will not make any concessions on the lives of 200 citizens" lost because of "provocations" by the opposition. He added, "The trials of defendants will be held quickly, carefully and seriously, and those who have committed crimes will face punishment."

The Iranian authorities have acknowledged that around 200 people have been killed in the protests, including around 50 to 60 security personnel, as well as "rioters," some "innocent" civilians and individuals who were victims of "plots" by dissident groups. Amnesty International has put the number of deaths at 305, including 41 children, while the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) claims at least 475 people have been killed, including 65 minors, and some 18,000 arrested.

On Monday, Iran carried out its first execution of a protester, hanging Mohsen Shekari, a 23-year-old man convicted of stabbing a member of the Basij, a voluntary organization under the command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and frightening people by blocking a street during the protests on September 25. The authorities claimed he had confessed, but close relatives say he was not allowed legal representation and that during his interrogation and trial, which was held in closed court, his face showed signs of bruising. His body has not been released.

In a separate case, five men have been sentenced to death for killing a member of the Basij in the city of Karaj west of Tehran. Eleven others, including three minors, have been sentenced to long jail sentences. As many as 21 people have been charged with sentences likely to carry the death penalty.

The IRGC praised the judiciary for its tough stance and urged it to move swiftly and decisively to issue judgments for defendants accused of "crimes against the security of the nation and Islam."

This comes at the end of a year that has seen Iran execute more than 500 people, according to Iran Human Rights, up from 333 in 2021 and the highest toll in five years. On Monday, the Norwegian-registered NGO said four Iranian men were hanged in Rajai Shahr prison, accused of collaborating with Israel's Mossad intelligence agency. Iran is second only to China in the number of executions carried out annually.

The protests have roiled Iran's political elite. Speaking ahead of Students Day, former President Mohammad Khatami, who belongs to the so-called Reformist faction, urged the government to take a more

lenient approach with protesters and listen to their demands before it was "too late." He had earlier tweeted that "bitter events" in Iran were being caused by the "faulty and incorrect mechanism and method of governance."

Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri announced that the morality police would be disbanded, a claim that was reaffirmed by Ali Khan-Mohammadi, the spokesman for the Headquarters of Promoting Virtue and Prohibiting Vice, one of the government's religious agencies. However, it is unclear that this has any substance since the morality police have not been much in evidence in recent months, with most of the enforcement of Iran's hijab laws carried out by the Basij.

This followed Montazeri's announcement of the previous day that a committee was reviewing the laws surrounding the wearing of the hijab. He gave no indication whether the government would revoke the law.

Ahmad Rastineh, who chairs parliament's cultural committee responsible for enacting the country's morality laws, accused the government institutions responsible for "explaining the hijab issue" of weakness and even failure, calling on them to "educate" the public and carry out reforms. As Rastineh belongs to the regime's conservative wing, his call reflects deep concern over its loss of support, the failure of the security services to suppress the protests and the urgent need for the government to protect the regime's stability.

This comes as the Biden administration continues to ratchet up pressure on Iran, with a view to leveraging the splits within the ruling elite to bring about a political reconfiguration more amenable to Washington's predatory interests, if not full-scale regime change.

Washington has signaled that reviving the Iran nuclear deal is no longer a priority for the United States. It is focusing instead on Iran's supply of drones and missiles to Russia—a drop in the bucket compared to the tens of billions of dollars of weaponry and aid supplied by Washington to Ukraine. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby claimed this week that Iran was continuing to send arms to Russia. On Dec. 3, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley said, "Iran is not interested in a deal and we're focused on other things," adding "Right now we can make a difference in trying to deter and disrupt the provision of weapons to Russia and trying to support the fundamental aspirations of the Iranian people."



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