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Mass protest in central and southern Iraq

Zaher Baher

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It looks like the US and Western Countries' propaganda, and the illusions of religion and nationalism, are no longer working for the people in central and southern Iraq. It might be that the time has arrived to end the sectarianism between Shia and Sunna. It's fifteen years since the collapse of Saddam Hussain and there has been thirteen years (2005) of Shia government. The failure of the election process and parliamentary system should have given both Iraqi Shia and Sunna the lesson that the real changes cannot happen through this process and establishment. This was probably also the main reason only 38% of the electorate participated in Iraq general election in May this year.

During this period the real winners were the politicians, businessmen, government ministers, heads of government departments and the foreign companies. The loser are the ordinary people who has lost everything - even the little they had under Saddam Hussein's regime. In addition, people has been suffering badly at the hands of corruption, privatisation, injustice, unem-

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ployment, a sectarian war, the widening a gap between rich and poor and lack of gas, electric and clean water.

People in central and southern Iraq obviously don't want to continue living this kind of life. For almost a week the people of Basra (a city rich from oil and gas and controlled by the central government and foreign oil corporations) have been fighting the authorities. The oil companies employ thirty thousand people - none of them from Basra.

Basra is the 3rd most important city in Iraq after Baghdad and Mosul where over five million people live. They have suffered terribly at the hands of the local authority and foreign companies. They have no decent health treatment or education. According to one Iraqi report 48% of Basra's residents have been diagnosed with a type of cancer whose cause has been linked to depleted uranium. Because of all this, the people of Iraq, especially those in the south and central area had no choice but to fight back against both local and central government.

Protesters in Basra have occupied many government's buildings and offices and are involved in street fighting with the police and security forces. People have also set fire to offices and the headquarters of political parties in the city.

Since Friday 13th July protest have spread to many other towns and cities including Nasiriyah, Maysan, Qadisiyyah, Karbal, Thi Qar , Babil and Najaf. In Najaf, the most Holy Shia City in Iraq, protesters managed to occupy and take control of the airport. In Basra they are trying to take control of the oil fields and refineries to stop oil being exported. On Saturday afternoon further protests started in four neighbourhoods of Baghdad very close to the Green Zone (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Zone) – a hugely sensitive place in Baghdad. It seems that the central government has now imposed a night curfew in certain areas of Baghdad. Other reports talk about the cutting off of the main road by the government between Baghdad and Kirkuk.

The situation is so tense that Haider al-Abadi, the Prime Minister of Iraq, shortened his visit to Brussels so he could return to Basra on Saturday to have a meeting with the authorities, politicians, and the heads of police and security in Basra. Protesters tried to occupy the meeting hall but they were crushed by the police and the security.

We do not know the exact numbers of people killed or injured as there are many different reports. Some reports confirm over twenty protesters killed, more than 240 injured and over 1000 protesters arrested. In the mean-time central government doesn't want the news of protesters and their activities reaching other cities. From Saturday morning until Monday morning Facebook was down and from Saturday 6pm until after 11am on Sunday there was no internet.

We do not know what the outcome will be, but so far political parties haven't managed to restrain or control the protests. And, at present there are no religion demand, slogans, anthems or shouting "God is Great" from the protestors.

However, if people do not organise themselves in non-hierarchical independent groups in every work places, streets and neighbourhoods to coordinate their actions it is difficult to be optimistic about the situation. There is also the possibility that protesters face the dirty policy of the government and the bloody tactics in killing of the state that push protesters to defend themselves with weapons. This could change their mass struggle through peaceful demonstrations and protests to a civil war. Recent history of the "Arab Spring" shows that civil wars only really benefit those in authority, the rich, the corporations and the system in general.