

Despite Political Turmoil and Coronavirus, Iraq's Protest Movement Continues

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Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist based in Iraq. His writing focuses on a variety of issues, including politics, health, society, wars, and human rights. Al-Rubaie is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

With neighboring Iran one of the most severely affected areas of coronavirus, Iraqi authorities are also confirming rising infections and deaths despite closing the border between the two states.

However, Iraqi protestors maintain that “oppression and fear are more dangerous than coronavirus,” and have consistently demonstrated a will to continue what has become known as the [October 2019 revolution](#).

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/protests-in-iraq-against-domestic-corruption-and-iranian-influence>

As physical gatherings become increasingly susceptible to community spread, Iraqi protestors have continued to rely on slogans on-and off-line to challenge the regime, corruption, and political quotas to communicate their demands. These demands include radical changes to the makeup of the Cabinet, disbanding the quota system for government formation, electing independent political figures who have popular support, putting corrupt officials on trial, and [changing the election law with the goal of holding early elections](#).

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraq-needs-a-new-prime-minister>

The protests have been successful in upending the political status quo in Iraq, as successive prime ministers and nominees have struggled and failed to halt or satisfy the protestors. This tenacity has in part developed due to the early and repeated violence towards protestors by Iraqi authorities and militias, who have responded to protests with live ammunition, rubber bullets, boiling water, tear gas, batons, and knives—

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-evolution-of-iraqs-protests-excessive-force-pushes-protesters-to-adapt> killing hundreds and wounding thousands.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-evolution-of-iraqs-protests-excessive-force>

pushes-protesters-to-adapt)

The Iranian militias have also continued systematic detainment, kidnapping, torture, and killing of protesters, journalists, and activists throughout Iraq. The government and its security forces only responded with statements denouncing the situation, without any investigation into who was carrying out these crimes or to which entities they belonged.

In spite of these attacks on protesters, former prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi's resignation on November 30, 2019 has left Iraq with a caretaker government as coalitions and political forces have struggled to find a replacement acceptable to the protesters, even as political factions look to satisfy their own interests.

Initially, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi was nominated after an agreement **with the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, and Badr militia leader Hadi al-Amiri to approve the nomination** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/moqtada-al-sadr-and-the-international-coalition-common-ground-and-fault-lin>). In the first video announcement after his appointment, Allawi threatened to hold accountable all those responsible for violence against protesters, yet riot police and armed militias continued to target peaceful protesters.

In response, "We reject Mohammed Allawi" became a widespread slogan. Many protesters saw Allawi as unacceptable because they saw him as connected with the parties and political quota system. His nomination also spurred protesters to demand the resignation of Speaker of the Council of Representatives Mohamed al-Halbousi. Some activists believed that al-Halbousi was the reason that the prime minister and his cabinet were chosen, as well as the reason for the delay in issuing the election law for early election—a cornerstone of protester demands.

After failing to form a cabinet on the March 1 deadline, which Allawi claimed was due to political pressures, Allawi resigned, opening the door for this week's nomination and quick rejection of Adnan al-Zurfi.

Iraqis' opinions of the new nominee were divided; while some saw his background of living in the United States as a sign that he could put an end to Iranian intervention and proxy sponsorship in Iraq, others were skeptical that Al-Zurfi could be effective as he had not occupied a major position in any previous governments.

However, the protest movement and Iraq's Shia parties came together in an unexpected joint statement rejecting his candidacy, though the result of this statement remains to be seen.

Online Activism during #stay_home

These political challenges are further complicated by the spread of the virus; protesters have distributed pamphlets and gave speeches about how to protect yourself from coronavirus, while also distributing face masks for free after prices spiked in local markets. Moreover, the temporary clinics that protesters had established months before to treat those wounded with live ammunition or tear gas canisters are now distributing gloves and disinfectants.

How, a curfew is affecting Tahrir square, one of the centers of the protest: a prepared statement announced the temporary halting of demonstrations due to the severity of the coronavirus pandemic. Some protesters have shifted to making campaigns to sterilize the protests square to avoid the infection, other protesters took to the streets to spray disinfectants as precautionary measures to face coronavirus.

Even if protesters leave the streets entirely, calls for change are likely to continue with fervor online. Social media sites have already played a key role in the ongoing October revolution, through launching calls to protest and articulating the rights protesters are demanding. Activists and protesters have found social media platforms an important alternative to the deliberate neglect of their voices after government media sources deliberately neglected to cover the movement. Every time a protester is subject to violence, there is a new hashtag on social meaning that

calls for an end to violence against protestors, demands that the UN and international human rights organizations put pressure on the government, or calls for the government to adhere to human rights conventions that Iraq previously signed and has pledged to abide by.

The main hashtags that the activists have created have included: “We’ve reached our limit,” “Save the Iraqi people,” and “Iraq is bleeding,” after massacres by the anti-riot forces and militias affiliated with political authorities in Baghdad and Najaf governorates opened fire on the protestors, killing dozens and wounding hundreds. The scale of this violence led to a new hashtag: “Genocide in Iraq.” Meanwhile, the Iraqi government remained silent and unable to hold the criminals accountable. Protestors claimed, and observers reaffirmed, that this was evidence of the cooperation of Iraqi forces and the perpetrators of those crimes against Iraqi protestors.

In particular, online memorialization of casualties has increased the momentum of the popular movement. To protest the nomination of Allawi, for example, activists used the hashtag “March 1, Voice of the Martyrs” to mobilize protesters from across the country. Protestors coming from all provinces of Iraq gathered at the gates of the Green Zone, amid fears of the coronavirus spreading. In response to this concern, the protestors to use the hashtag “No Shame in Masks,” calling on protesters to wear masks as protection against both tear gas and coronavirus.

Allawi then tweeted to explain the reasons he rejected the cabinet, saying, “It was a simple and clear choice, whether or not to stand with my steadfast people, especially when I saw some political actors not being serious about reform and not fulfilling their promises to the people. They are creating obstacles to forming an independent cabinet that can work for the good of the country.”

However, Allawi’s apology did not pacify the angry streets, and Iraqis demanded an explanation as to why he failed to form a cabinet after a conflict took place between the political forces and foreign pressures about approving unqualified candidates. Before Allawi’s announcement of his failure to form a cabinet, the spaces of protest in Baghdad including al-Khalani Square saw further casualties among protestors who came from all the provinces of Iraq, while Allawi failed to keep to his promises about stopping violence against protestors.

Twitter hashtags have served as a kind of alternative to official action, helping to attract the attention of media around the world, as well as international organizations, to increase pressure on the official government agencies. The international governments that have subsequently denounced the violence include Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Holland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the United States.

Even before the threat of a pandemic, online protests have also provided an alternative path for protesters to demand their rights during state impose curfews or violence. Now that people are staying home, prompted by the Iraqi version of the #Stay_home campaign, Iraqis are once again leaning on virtual protests to continue the October 2019 revolution.

This continued conversation between protesters will likely ensure the survival of the movement beyond the current social distancing necessary to slow the spread of the virus. Moreover, as this week’s announcement demonstrates, the protest movement has no intention of quieting its calls for serious reform. ❖

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