

Iraq: al-Sadr prepares bloody counter-revolution

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Iraq's revolutionary democratic protest movement, which started on October 1, 2019, is facing its biggest test yet, as interim Prime Minister Mohammad Allawi is set to announce his government, designed to end the uprising.

High school and university students have led the movement with a wave of strikes, which threatened to lead to cancelling the whole academic year, and square occupations, including the symbolic Tahrir (?liberation?) Square in Baghdad. But the movement is widespread throughout the nine Shia-majority, southern and central provinces, with other centres of activism in Basra and Nasariyah.

Repression has been brutal and bloody. Over 550 protesters (and 13 security forces) have been killed by the army and police, aided by members of the Shia Hashd al-Shaabi militias, the Iranian-influenced Popular Mobilisation Units, PMU. An estimated 25,000 have been injured.

More recently, the "Blue Hats", members of Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam militia, who used to provide protection for the protesters from the Iranian-backed militia until they switched sides, have also killed protesters. In particular, they turned on them after al-Sadr's failed million-man march, when protesters captured a restaurant in Tahrir Square that housed the movement's radio station.

The psychology of the protesters has to be understood in the context of half of Iraq's 40 million population being under 21. That is, they have only known Iraq's sectarian, post-US invasion, government. They are as angry with Iran as with US imperialism for destroying the country's infrastructure, corrupting the political system and wasting public services and jobs.

It is also why there is a strong bias against political parties, since all of these have been implicated in the corruption that is an inevitable by-product of the power-sharing political system. In this, Sunni, Shia and Kurdish blocs of parties in parliament divide up the spoils of office and reward their followers with jobs and money.

As one protester said, "If we had a leader, then this movement would have been over a long time ago. It's easy for a leader to be compromised or co-opted by the forces he's fighting against". Another protest leader presented their goals like this:

"Today, the protesters are threatening the financial empire of the parties. The people want a people's government and this threatens the [parties] .??.?since they won't then be able to rob [it].?"

Another important feature of the movement is the prominent involvement of women. On February 14, in response to al-Sadr's tweet that protesters should be segregated, a women's march defied him, chanting, "Stop discrimination against women, stop gender segregation!?"

An elderly supporter explained the profundity of the change, saying these younger women, "have broken

down all these tribal norms, the religious fatwa, the hegemony of male mentality against them. This is a new era we are living in?.

For all these reasons, alongside the growing crisis and poverty facing the new generation, the protesters remain determined to fight for their demands: for jobs and public services, against government corruption, for the withdrawal of all foreign powers from Iraq and for democratic, free elections and an end to the sectarian division of posts.

The rise of al-Sadr

The influence of Moqtada al-Sadr has been steadily growing for over 15 years now. He came to prominence as the leader of the Mahdi Army, which took on the US and British invasion forces, first in Basra, then further afield from 2004 onwards. Then, having initially sought to unite with Sunni opponents of the US invaders, he turned his forces on the Sunnis in a sectarian conflict that saw atrocities on all sides.

He commands the allegiance of large numbers of Iraqi Shias, initially because of his revered father, Grand Ayatollah, Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, whose defiance of Saddam Hussein led to his assassination in 1999, but increasingly because of his own political and military weight. He is not, however, the most powerful cleric in Iraq.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who rarely makes political interventions and then usually on the side of the protest movement, is his senior. Moqtada is, however, studying in Qom, in Iran, to become an Ayatollah himself. Indeed, he rarely leaves Iran these days; his last sighting was in Najaf in late October. When protesters gave him a hostile reception, perceiving him to be part of the corrupt establishment, he rapidly returned to Qom.

From 2011 onwards, he participated in the government both through his parliamentary bloc and through ministers loyal to his movement. At the same time, he supported protests (which have erupted spontaneously since 2011) against the very same government, in which he has become something of a kingmaker. In 2014, when Sistani called on Iraqis to take up arms against ISIS, the Mahdi Army was reborn as the 'blue hats'.

The current movement has, however, posed problems for al-Sadr. The youth have accepted the protection of his Saraya al-Salam militia against repression by government and Iranian-backed forces, led by General Qassim Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, but they have not welcomed his political interventions and his 'charter of the reform revolution'.

Sadr's attempt to hegemonise the movement by calling a 'million-man march' in January was widely considered a flop. As one protester said, 'This million-man march is different from what the street wants. It supports the current political system in the country, it doesn't oppose it'.

Recent events, like the women's march in defiance of al-Sadr's attempts to introduce gender segregation in the movement, have confirmed that his once-powerful influence on the streets is waning. Even one of his clerics, caught between the protesters and the blue hats, exclaimed, 'I will take off the turban for the love of Iraq and the city of Nasiriyah and the revolutionaries, and I am with the Iraqis'.

Reject the sell-out deal

The political assassination of Soleimani and the PMU leader Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis at Baghdad airport on January 3 dramatically shifted the political landscape. Sadr is, if nothing else, a wily opportunist and saw his moment. He had long since abandoned his support for Iran playing an overt role in Iraq's internal

politics and now describes himself as an Iraqi nationalist.

Now, with Iran having suffered a major blow to its ambitions in the country and themselves lost several leaders in the attack, the PMUs were ready to compromise. Following the resignation of the provisional Prime Minister, Abdul Mahdi, in late October, the way was open for the re-emergence of Mohammad Allawi, a former cabinet minister in Nouri al-Maliki's government from 2006 to 2010.

First of all, in early January, Sadr offered, and formed, a 'united resistance front' with the Iran-backed militias, under his leadership of course. Then he backed Allawi taking over as interim PM on February 1.

At the same time, he initiated secret talks with Allawi's representatives and the PMU militia leaders; a deal brokered in Qom on or around February 1. It appears no Iranian government representatives were present. News of its contents quickly spread, not least because of the big mouths of the militia leaders.

Allawi himself announced the imminent formation of a new government on February 14, which he claimed would be 'independent' and stacked with 'competent and impartial people, without the intervention of any political party'.

He has also promised jobs, an end to corruption and new elections, as well as bringing the killers of protesters to justice and removing all foreign forces from Iraqi territory, in a move designed to placate, or at least divide, the protesters.

If this is the carrot, the stick is, literally, in the hands of the blue hats, who have shown their hand as poachers-turned-game-keepers, turning on their former allies and attacking the protesters, in order to drive out what al-Sadr calls the 'infiltrators' and 'instigators'.

Al-Sadr and Allawi's deal is a huge con. One Iran-backed leader told Middle East Eye, '[Allawi] is weaker than Abdul Mahdi, and they chose him precisely because he is weak. He is not allowed to open any real corruption files and his government is not authorised to make any strategic decisions, including removing foreign forces from Iraq.'

Furthermore, Allawi's government is apparently going to proceed in integrating the PMU militias into the Iraqi army - a move which will rightly incense protesters who have suffered torture, rape and worse at their hands.

The protesters need to rapidly rebuild the movement, which has recently subsided into its Shia heartlands, restarting protests in Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi, which rose up last autumn. They should also try to force the unions into more active support. The teachers have taken prolonged strike action alongside their students, but the oil workers also need to be persuaded to take industrial action.

Any division along sectarian lines will be seized upon, not just by Iran but by the US, whose military leaders are discussing dividing the country and taking Anbar province under their tutelage.

Real action committees, with representatives from across the working class and youth have to be formed, possibly out of the assemblies of the occupied squares, and united nationally.

Despite the justified hatred of 'leaders' and 'political parties', only a unified movement which chooses its own leaders can defeat the reactionary coalition currently confronting it. But within such a movement a revolutionary party needs to be formed, able to weld together immediate economic and democratic demands into a programme that points to a transition towards socialism.

It is unlikely that al-Sadr and Allawi will be able to ?end the demonstrations?, as they have threatened, in the near future. Nevertheless, repression does, eventually, work, unless it is disoriented, demoralised and defeated by an organised and suitably armed resistance. That is now the task of the day.

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