

Dozens of Iraqis have died in recent days in clashes between protesters and the security forces during street demonstrations that caught the authorities by surprise.

They were the first major deadly protests for more than a year.

## **Why are people protesting?**

Iraqis are fed up. Two years after the defeat of Islamic State much of the country's nearly 40 million population live in worsening conditions despite the country's oil wealth.

Security is better than it has been in years, but wrecked infrastructure has not been rebuilt and jobs are scarce. Youth blame this squarely on what they see as corrupt leaders who do not represent them.

## **Why are conditions so bad?**

After decades of war against its neighbours, U.N. sanctions, two U.S. invasions, foreign occupation and sectarian civil war, the defeat of the Islamic State insurgency in 2017 means Iraq is now at peace and free to trade for the first extended period since the 1970s. Oil output is at record levels.

But infrastructure is decrepit and deteriorating, war-damaged cities have yet to be rebuilt and armed groups still wield power on the streets.

A culture of corruption has persisted since the era of dictator Saddam Hussein and has become entrenched under the rule of sectarian political parties that emerged after his fall.

## **What sparked the latest protests? Who organised them?**

The protests do not appear to be coordinated by a particular political group. Social media calls for protests gathered pace early this week. The turnout appeared to take security forces by surprise.

The inadequacy of state services and the lack of jobs are the principal reasons for public anger. A series of political moves by the government has contributed, especially the demotion of a popular wartime military officer for reasons that have not been fully

explained. Some at the demonstrations were protesting over the commander's removal.

### **Are mass protests rare in Iraq?**

Major protests took place mainly in the southern city of Basra in September last year. Nearly 30 people were killed.

Since then, sporadic demonstrations have taken place but not on the scale of this week's events. These were the first large demonstrations against Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government, which took office in October last year.

### **Will they spread? What are the risks?**

It depends on how the government and security services handle the protests. More deaths – so far more than 80 people have been killed – will fuel anger. But a heavy-handed crackdown could also scare protesters into staying home.

Many Iraqis believe powerful paramilitary groups backed by Iran were behind violent crackdowns in Basra last year. Turnout for protests since then has been small.

If tribal or factional armed groups get involved the situation could deteriorate. Gunfights broke out in southern cities this week between unidentified gunmen and police.

### **Will the government meet protestors' demand?**

The government has promised better employment opportunities for Iraqis.

This week Abdul Mahdi promised jobs for graduates and instructed the oil ministry and other government bodies to include a 50% quota for local workers in subsequent contracts with foreign companies.

Similar promises and pledges to improve healthcare, electricity and services were made last year by the previous government.

### **Is the unrest sectarian?**

No. Most Iraqis have sought to avoid sectarian rhetoric after the brutal experience of Sunni hardline Islamic State – although sectarian tension still exists. These protests are about worsening economic and living conditions and are taking place mostly in Baghdad and the

Shi'ite Muslim-dominated south but cut across ethnic and sectarian lines. Anger is directed at a political class, not a sect.

That contrasts with protests in 2012 and 2013 that Islamic State exploited to rally support among Sunnis.

### **What does it mean for the government?**

Because no political party or group is publicly involved in these demonstrations – not even the so-called opposition parliamentary grouping of firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr who has orchestrated some unrest in the past – the government might struggle to control them.

If they spread, it is unclear what options the government has. There is no mention so far of reshuffles or resignations. Parties that agreed to bring Abdul Mahdi to power, and which control the weak premier, are likely to want to keep him there.

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