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Middle East

Popular protest is back in the Middle East

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The Covid-19 pandemic was only a temporary truce in popular protest movements for freedom and social justice in the region. The pandemic deepened socio-economic problems, while regimes often took advantage of containment measures to strengthen the crackdown on activists.

Lebanon: "Thawra 2"

Even before the official end of confinement in Lebanon in mid-April, the first demonstrations resumed, after having stopped for more than a month. Protesters across the country have revived the slogans of the protest movement that began on October 17 last year, denouncing the Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal system. In late April, the army killed a young protester in the northern city of Tripoli. In this region, the poorest in the country, this provoked an explosion of popular anger against the police. Repression has grown steadily. Hundreds of protesters have been arrested. Charges of torture have also been launched on several occasions against certain security services.

The demands relating to socio-economic issues are all the more highlighted as the country is going through the worst economic crisis since the end of the civil war more than 30 years ago. Since mid-March, there has been a dizzying drop in purchasing power, due in particular to the fall in the value of the national currency by more than 150 per cent (from 1,500 to 4,000 Lebanese pounds for \$1), inflation and the alarming rise in unemployment which appears to have risen to more than 50 per cent.

The proportion of Lebanese living below the poverty line is likely to exceed 50 per cent in 2020; it was estimated to be 30 per cent before the Covid-19 crisis. At the same time, the state had to cancel a large-scale aid distribution programme due to gross errors of incompetence and political patronage in drawing up lists of beneficiaries.

Many banks were the target of the demonstrators, who ransacked several head offices and branches in different regions of the country. Anger has steadily increased against the "power of the banks" associated with the neoliberal and denominational political elites who have played a fundamental role in the economic policy of the country, accumulating monumental profits in recent decades, and during the current crisis.

For its part, the Lebanese government is advancing with a programme of "reforms" in connection with demands from the IMF and other international financial institutions, in order to obtain a loan of several billion dollars. These "reforms" include privatization and austerity policies that will severely affect the working classes of the country.

Back to the streets in Iraq

In Iraq, the protest movement is also experiencing a new lease of life as deconfinement advances. May 10 marked the return of mass protests in Baghdad and in the south of the country, while austerity measures have already been announced.

The suspension of the demonstrations did not mean the cessation of militant activities. The protesters notably organized health prevention initiatives and undertook fundraising and provision of basic necessities for those most

affected by the economic consequences of the oil crisis and a confinement that deprived them of their daily income. The country's economy depends largely on the sale of hydrocarbons, which represent 99 per cent of exports and 93 per cent of the country's revenue.

According to the World Bank, 2020 promises to be the worst year for Iraq since the invasion and occupation by the United States in 2003. GDP has contracted by 9.7 per cent, the poverty rate has risen to 20 per cent and could even double in the coming months.

The protests must also face the continuing violence from fundamentalist Shiite Islamic militias who continue their deadly attacks against the demonstrators. Since the outbreak of the popular uprising in Iraq in October, there have been nearly 670 people killed and more than 24,400 injured.

No alternative to resistance

The pandemic enabled states in the region to impose containment measures, not for health reasons or out of a desire to protect the health of the working classes, but to put an end to protest movements. This has turned out to be only a parenthesis; the demonstrations and actions of popular resistance are back and are reiterating their demands for radical changes in the face of worsening socio-economic problems and the strengthening of authoritarian policies.

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