

Distorted Democracy

Democratic Transformation and Sectarian Identities in Iraq after 2003

On 25 February 2011, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets in Baghdad and other major cities to protest for better living conditions, and against the insufficient provision of basic services and the complete lack of credible solutions to solve the unemployment crisis. Mismanagement, dysfunctional government institutions and the endemic corruption have taken a high toll on the quality of life of the majority of Iraqis. An estimated 25% of Iraqis live below the poverty line with only 2.2 USD per day, the unemployment rate varies according to the source between 15%-30% and female participation in the labor force is as low as 14.2 %. Power cuts are the norm, clean drinking water is a scarcity for millions of Iraqis, and food insecurity is widespread with an estimated additional 6.2 million Iraqis being at risk of becoming food insecure should the Public Distribution System continue with its poor performance. Freedoms of expression and of association are curtailed, torture is known to be wide spread in Iraqi prisons, the independence of the judiciary is questionable, and a functional separation of powers is at stake. Recent actions taken by Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's Prime Minister, to centralize power by undermining the independence of important state institutions, such as the Central Bank and the Commission on Public Integrity to Combat Government Corruption, are observed with irritation and concern. Indeed, 8 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in 2003 – a period that witnessed two democratic parliamentary elections – the living conditions in Iraq are not significantly different from the conditions of other Arab countries which

have been under the firm grip of decade-old dictatorships.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the al-Maliki government, mindful of the slogans that have been raised by protesters around the Arab world over the past few months, was quick at flexing its muscles. The government responded by sending out threatening messages in an attempt to prevent protests on the so called "Day of Rage". State television was mobilized to broadcast threats and to make clear that any calls for the fall of the al-Maliki regime would be put down, reminding the protesters that the current government was democratically elected and that it enjoyed international acknowledgement and hence

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legitimacy. The masses were neither convinced nor intimidated; the day ended in the killing of no less than 29 protesters and in the arrest of several journalists.

In following days and weeks, Iraqi civil society organized further protests and submitted a letter to al-Maliki in which it stated



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that not only corruption but, more importantly, the way the Iraqi political system has evolved are both obstacles to improvement of living conditions and to progress in developing a genuinely democratic state; it has become a confessionalist system that is based on sectarian and ethnic quotas.

State Destruction instead of State Building

Eight years earlier, in March 2003, the US-led “coalition of the willing” invaded Iraq with mainly two officially declared objectives: to eliminate Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, and to free the Iraqi people from dictatorship so as to pave the way for the emergence of a

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democratic Iraq. The fall of the Iraqi Ba’athist regime - as understood from the rhetoric of the U.S. administration prior to the invasion – would be the starting point for the process of building a democratic state in which “reform-minded local leaders could build lasting institutions of freedom”¹. What followed in the years after the fall of Baghdad, was the complete destruction of a state: the deliberate dismantling of major state institutions and national industries (e.g. dissolving the Iraqi Army, de-Ba’athification, and privatizing state-owned enterprises); the destruction of all social infrastructure (health, energy, education, etc.); cultural devastation that robbed the Iraqi society of the symbols of their historical identity (looting of national museums and archeological sites, burning of national archives and libraries, attacks on historical monuments); elimination of an educated middle class and the depletion of a



Iraqi protesters in Basra, on 25 February, raising posters with pictures in which the top of forefingers, blue with the color of the election ink, are cut off. Underneath the picture it says “we regret”. The protesters make clear their dissatisfaction with the government performance.

skilled labor force (targeted assassinations of professionals and academics in the thousands); and the deprivation of the ethnic and cultural diversity that previously characterized the Iraqi society (ethnic cleansings of previously mixed neighborhoods, and targeted attacks against Iraq’s minority groups that have been part of the societies in the geographic area of Iraq for thousands of years, 1.7 million refugees and 2.8 million internally displaced persons²).

The dismantling of the Iraqi Army, replaced by occupation forces, created a security vacuum. The door was open to the uncontrolled import of arms which ensured that militias would be in a position to lead on armed struggle for years. While other state institutions officially remained in place, in practice they had become dysfunctional and the provision of basic services came to a near stop. It comes as no surprise that under such conditions, the access to resources had to be guaranteed with the force of arms, strengthening further the militias that were able to provide both security and services to their various clienteles within the areas under their domain.

Besides the security and administrative vacuums that came with the dismantling of the state, there was also a political vacuum that now needed to be filled. Under the rule of Saddam, loyalty was synonymous with loyalty to

¹ <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article1710.htm>

² <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq>

the one ruling party, the Ba'ath. There was no alternative. In 2003, the time had come for the Iraqi opposition groups and parties, whether exiled or not, to return to the political sphere, to pursue their political interests, and to ensure their say in the shaping of the political system in Iraq. These groups and parties had distinct ideological visions on what the new state should

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be like. They needed to gain the support of the masses and create new loyalties in order to ensure their political survival. Mainly, the new loyalties would be pre-dominantly based on the sectarian and ethnic identities of these groups, supported by the different historical narratives and ideologically colored readings of the current situation.

Among these groups were those who claimed to pursue a nationalist, secular project that would maintain the unity of Iraq under the umbrella of a democratic pluralistic state. Other groups pursued a religious agenda, supporting the formation of a state of Islamic rule. Here the different Shia political parties – mainly the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) and Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Da'wa Party – held conflicting visions over how the Islamic state should be ruled. While the Da'wa Party envisioned an Islamic government that would be controlled by the Islamic "umma" (in other words, the Muslim community as a whole), the ISCI supported an Iranian-style Islamic government that would be ruled by distinguished Islamic scholars ("ulama"). Another important player in the Shia camp is the Sadrist movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr.

This religious, popular movement envisioned a state where rule is based on a combination of religious and tribal values. In opposition to the Shia camp stood the various Muslim Sunni groups, the most prominent party among them being the Iraqi Islamic Party. However, the majority of these groups, including Al Qaeda affiliated groups, were driven rather by the fear of becoming a marginalized minority, and their objectives were more concentrated on leading the resistance against the occupation of Iraq.

Groups whose followership was built on an ethnic identity were the two main political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan: Jalal Talabani's Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Mahmoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). For many years, both parties had led the struggle of the Kurdish people against the terror of Saddam's regime. They are deeply rooted in the Kurdish communities and have established their legitimacy as the leaders of the Kurdish people in Iraq.

To establish their legitimacy, all these different groups competed for a broad basis of followers. For this purpose, they played on primordial sectarian and ethnic identities for which they created a social environment conducive to expanding their bases (alternative delivery of services, family support to widows and orphans of martyrs, protection by the groups' armed militias). They injected these identities with values that would clearly differentiate them from the other groups. Hence, these identities were not only based on the sectarian or ethnic affiliation, but they came to stand for the different ideals promoted by the various Shia, Sunni, or Kurdish groups.

What is more, these ideals, over time, became impersonated by the leader of each group. Affiliating oneself with a group meant loyalty to that group's leader. This is evidenced by the fact that since 2003, the leaderships of the groups that have come to power have not changed. Those who assumed leading political roles in 2003 have remained in power, though assuming different political posts in the course of time.

Laying the Ground for Ethno-Sectarianism

The emergence of these sectarian and ethnic dynamics in shaping the political landscape of Iraq was supported by the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) policy approach towards governance. The CPA was established in April 2003, and in May 2003 L. Paul Bremer became the U.S. Presidential Envoy and Governor of Iraq. Under his rule, the CPA took actions that were favorable for the emergence of a sectarian/ethnic political system in Iraq. Most commonly known are the CPA's dissolution of the Iraqi Army and the rigorous de-Ba'athification process that it pursued. Regardless of the different visions of the Iraqi political groups, the CPA worked towards implementing its own vision for Iraq which was that of a parliamentary democracy with a federal system of government.

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At the beginning of its rule in early 2003, the CPA strongly backed "secularist" Iraqi opposition leaders returned from exile, specifically Ahmad Chalabi from the London-based Iraqi National Congress and Ayad Allawi, leader of the Iraqi National Accord. However, it soon became clear that these two political figures could not act as local leaders because they lacked the popular support that would give them legitimacy. Instead, the CPA embarked on a process of brokering deals with the other more popular political groups, mainly Shia and Kurdish. As an outcome of these deals, the CPA created the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in July 2003. Its members were selected based on a sectarian and ethnic formula. Such a formula was also implemented for the appointment of ministry posts, and it was further implemented

at the level of local governing councils where the CPA added seats, more or less randomly, which reflected ethnic and sectarian representation³. Henceforth, an ethnic and sectarian formula would become the organizing principle of politics in Iraq, facilitating the rise of polarized communal forces at the local level. The fact that these councils and governing bodies were appointed by the CPA, rather than being the outcome of civic dialogue and elections, deprived them of their legitimacy.

One year later, on 28 June 2004 the CPA appointed the Iraq Interim Government to which sovereignty was transferred and which was mandated with overseeing the process of drafting a permanent Iraqi constitution that would replace the Transitional Administration Law. The CPA was dissolved and Paul Bremer left Iraq on the same day. It was only in December 2005 that the first parliamentary elections for the Council of Representatives (Iraqi parliament) were held, and consequently the elected council assumed its functions in June 2006. By then, the sectarian and ethnic dynamics of power sharing between the different groups and factions had become a reality, and the elections that took place in 2005 lent these tendencies further political legitimacy. In the following years, up to the March 2010 elections and in the formation of the current government the same dynamics prevail, enforcing a political system where the division of power and the allocation of political posts are based on sectarian and ethnic affiliations.

The current constellation in the Iraqi political system is sadly reminiscent of another model in the region, that of Lebanon. Since 1943 the division of power is based on a sectarian formula that emerged from a general consensus among rival power groups. This formula survived for 46 years dominating political, economic and social life. What is more, having become a long-term practice of politics, this system

³ Castles Built of Sand: US Governance and Exit Strategies in Iraq, www.merip.org/

was legally enshrined in the Taef Accord of 1989 and is reflected until today in Lebanon's election law. The struggle of different sects in Lebanon has resulted in a system in which political competition among "parties" is limited by the sectarian quotas and sectarian interests as opposed to national interests. The decision-

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making process in Lebanon is paralyzed, the state is dysfunctional and sects have replaced the state to a large extent in the provision of services. With government institutions rendered to specific entities of specific ethnic or sectarian affiliation, clientelism is the outcome. The scope of opportunities for youth outside the realm of "their" sect is limited thereby negatively affecting the domestic labor market. In addition, the threat of internal conflicts is prevalent and arises every time one sectarian party sees its interests threatened.

Moving Beyond the Sectarian Divide

Many Iraqis realize that the trend in which their political system is developing is producing a Lebanon-like political system. Political parties in Iraq lack real political programs that go beyond ideological visions and utopian ambitions for short-term change. They are voted into governing bodies not because Iraqi voters are genuinely convinced of the slogans raised during election periods or of the quality of electoral candidates. Rather, their supporters base their votes on ethnic, sectarian, tribal and nepotistic considerations which have become

the basis for voter decision making. Hence, even though Iraqi political parties fall short of proposing any true practical approach to solve economic and social problems, they still reach power. The influence of implementing sectarian quotas for political representation purposes can also be seen in the structure of the executive branch of the Iraqi government, the Council of Ministers. In Iraq there are currently more than 40 ministers, who were appointed to maintain a certain ethnic/sectarian representation, but who assume no real role; they receive salaries but often have no physical premises from which they can carry out their governance duties. There is valid concern that also future elections and negotiations over government formations will not bring to office political forces interested in and capable of inducing real change.

Iraqi intellectuals and civil society activists voice their concerns over these developments openly, most lately in a letter addressed to al-Maliki, in which the sectarian divide of the political system takes the main blame for the degenerated overall situation; wide-spread corruption comes second on the list of factors. The signatories of the letter urge the al-Maliki government to put a real effort into countering the development trend of the political system that is heading towards a confessionalist regime.

Civil society representatives demand that practicable strategies be developed to address a number of areas. They demand that civil rights be guaranteed, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and the right to be free from torture and other inhumane treatment. They demand that accountability be practiced on all levels: the persecution of administrative corruption, persecution of criminals and those who commit terrorist acts, and persecution of organized crime. They ask their government to come forth and implement credible and realistic strategies to reduce poverty, increase the living standard and quality of life, and to improve the education system and protect it from sectarian dominion. They request that the government, as evidence

of its true willingness, improves the system of legal guarantees to rights and freedoms through legislative amendments and by ensuring the independence of the judiciary and that law enforcement bodies will be held accountable. Civil society representatives, further, demand that they be given space to actively take part in political decision making processes, and that other minority groups and women also be included. They want to have a say in the strategies that the state needs to develop to address the variety of problems.

Their hope is that if their demands are taken seriously and acted upon by the government

in a way that gives priority to national interests instead of sectarian ones, a social, economic and cultural environment may emerge that would hinder any further manifestation of a sectarian political system. Only then will there be a true chance for Iraq to shift to a different tangent that would eventually lead to a democratic, civil system of governance that is capable of addressing the needs of its citizens and of constructively dealing with the legacies of the past.