



Iraq Protests: Symptoms of a Structural Crisis or Harbingers of Political Change?

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The latest wave of anti-government protests in south-eastern Iraq started with Basra on July 8, when unemployed youngsters gathered outside major oilfields demanding jobs and better services. After protesters were killed at the hands of police, they spread to the neighbouring southern cities of Amara, Nasiriyah and Muthanna. Venting out anger against Shi'ite parties which have benefitted from Iran's assistance in advancing their political fortunes in Iraq's ethno-sectarian power sharing system, protesters have targeted the offices of the National Wisdom Movement, Dawa parties and Badr Organization.¹ The protests waned after the Abadi government deployed Iraqi security forces and initiated some policy interventions such as suspending the electricity minister and province-by-province discussions with officials and tribal leaders to address the demands of the protesters.² However, the attacks on government and party offices intensified once again when protests gathered renewed momentum following cases of water poisoning related deaths in Basra in the last week of August.³ The only Shi'ite party which has been spared the wrath of the protesters is the Sadrist movement. The fear of being labelled terrorists or Ba'athists by Shi'ite parties and militias has kept Sunni Iraqis from coming out in solidarity protests, especially since Shi'ite Popular Mobilisation Units maintain heavy presence in Sunni areas in the north and west, as the threat of ISIS sleeper cells still remains.

Situating the protests in the context of Iraq's troubled democratic transition, the paper argues that the protests in Iraq's Shi'ite heartland should be seen as a rebuff to the Post-Ba'athist ethno-sectarian power sharing system introduced by occupation authorities and embraced by formerly exiled Shi'ite parties. As Iraq's Post-Ba'athist democratic institutions are facing their worst crisis of legitimacy, the paper observes that Sadrist leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose Sairoon (March

for Reforms) alliance got the highest number of votes and Grand Ayatollah Sistani are well placed to further the popular cause of political change in Iraq.

Basra: the Epicentre of Protests

The resource rich governorate of Basra is located on the south-eastern edge of the country along the Shat al-Arab waterway, which marks the border with Iran. Basra's geographical proximity with Iran and its prominent position as the bastion of Shi'ite party politics has drawn Iran to cultivate religious and political influence with various Shi'ite parties and militias active in the region. In 2007, Basra was the hotbed of Shi'ite insurgency, when Iranian-backed militias, especially Jaish al-Mahdi of Muqtada al-Sadr targeted British and Iraqi security forces in anti-occupation insurgency as well as a power struggle with Nuri al-Maliki of Dawa party. The relatively calm security situation since Maliki's Operation Charge of Knights significantly weakened the Mahdi army -- which was later disbanded by Sadr -- has allowed Basrawis to focus on economic concerns. Their longstanding grievance has been that despite its massive contribution to Iraq's revenue, the region is ignored by the federal government. As a conciliatory measure to demands for making Basra a federal region like Iraqi Kurdistan, giving it more control over oil and natural gas policy, Basra was declared the economic capital of the country by Iraqi parliament in 2015. But unemployed Basrawis have frequently protested against the employment of cheap foreign labour in the local petroleum sector and poor public services.⁴

In recent years Basra's problems have been compounded by the pressure of low oil prices and the rise of Iranian sponsored and trained militias mobilised to fight ISIS. Unemployment drove tens of thousands young man from this second most populous city of Iraq to join the volunteer paramilitary force mobilised in response to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa. Initiated into Iraqi nationalism by their battlefield experience, they have now returned to their hometown beset with foreign influence, corruption, and lack of opportunities. Providing a vivid proof of Iranian influence in Iraq, in August, 2017, Basra governor Majid al-Nasrawi quit his post and fled to Iran after Iraq's anti-corruption body began investigating graft allegations against him.⁵ The incumbent governor As'ad al-Eidani recently argued that al-Abadi has refused to release the money allocated for the province because of the lack of impartial officials to handle it.⁶ The ongoing wave of protests against electricity and water crisis therefore escalated into violent targeting of Shi'ite parties seen as acting a vehicle for Iranian influence while engaging in massive corruption and politics of patronage. After violent protesters stormed the Iranian consulate and torched some part of it, Qais Khazali, the leader of Asaid al-Haq, a pro-Iran militia, whose Basra headquarter was also torched by the protesters, was quoted in Iran media as saying that "Basra riots were part of an American project to disintegrate the Arab country."⁷ The following day three rockets fired by unknown assailants hit the perimeter of the city airport, which also houses the US consulate.⁸

The geopolitical tensions between Iran and the United States also have their role in complicating the situation in Iraq. Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the pro-Iran Badr Organisation, who is also staking the claim for the position of Prime Minister, last month threatened the US

envoy against meddling in the formation of the government. He argued that ‘if the US imposes the name for the Prime Minister, he will overthrow his government in two months.’⁹ His warning came after the US envoy Brett McGurk met with Kurdish leadership in the north, and was seen as supporting the rival Sadr led alliance of Sairoon, Nasr, Hikma, and Wataniyya, which subsequently claimed that it has the support of Kurdish parties needed to form the government.

Shi’ite Islamist Parties facing a Crisis of Legitimacy

Iraqis have regularly protested against the lack of basic services – electricity and clean drinking water – especially in summers. However, the ongoing round of protests assumes greater importance as it comes after a parliamentary election that registered a record low turnout of 44.5 per cent and was marred by widespread allegation of fraud, prompting manual recounts of several ballot stations. While, Iraq’s political parties were engaged in talks for government formation, protests moved beyond immediate triggers of the lack of basic services and jobs to longer term grievances against the political parties and Iraq’s flawed political structure that breeds corruption and sectarianism, the twin problems that have severely debilitated the Iraqi state. The protests do not seem to separate economy and governance related grievances from the flawed political structure of post-Saddam Iraqi state and therefore can be seen as symptoms of a deeper structural crisis of a troubled democratic transition.

Iraqi democratic institutions have been dominated by the Shi’ite political parties, which returned to Iraq in 2003 after decades of exile in Iran or in Europe. These Shi’ite parties, as the erstwhile exiled anti-Saddam Iraqi opposition, were put in charge of Iraq’s new democratic institutions by the occupation authorities, while the Sunni leadership was marginalised as a result of the de-bathfication program. Lacking an organisational base in Iraq, these Shi’ite Islamist parties instrumentalised sectarian identities to mobilise support in the elections. Iraq’s unofficial ethno-sectarian power sharing system, which mandates that prime minister be a Shia, president a Kurd and parliament speaker a Sunni, further encouraged political parties to align in sectarian alliances. Interestingly, this ‘partnership’ system distributes power among all major political parties leaving no credible parliamentary opposition that can ensure government accountability. Furthermore, all senior government posts are also distributed along ethnic-sectarian lines. This system has encouraged patronage networks, which are used by political parties to distribute state resources and consolidate a narrow support base. Iraq’s institutions of representative democracy are thus facing their worst crisis of legitimacy as Shi’ites in the Basra-Amara-Nasiriyah triangle protest against the Shi’ite Islamist parties which have failed in delivering governance in the last fifteen years they have ruled Iraq.

The poor electoral performance of the Nasr (victory) coalition of Prime Minister Abadi, who belongs to the Islamist Dawa party that has been in power since 2005, and had built his electoral campaign around his leadership of Iraq to victory in the fight against ISIS, proved that fighting terrorists in the far-off Sunni dominated north-western provinces is a lesser issue in the Shi’ite heartland of south-eastern Iraq. Tellingly, two of the most popular slogans raised during the recent wave of protests have been ‘No, no to political parties’ and ‘corruption is terrorism.’¹⁰

The relatively better performance of Muqtada al-Sadr's reformist Sairoon coalition including the Iraqi Communist Party -- a partnership which emerged during anti-corruption protests of 2015-16 -- and the Fatah coalition of Popular Mobilising Units is widely interpreted as a vote for anti-status quo politics and a proof of declining support for Shi'ite Islamist parties dominated by former exiles. Muqtada al-Sadr, the radical Shi'ite cleric, whose Sadrist movement has massive following among disenfranchised Shi'i Iraqis, was able to outmanoeuvre his Shi'ite rivals by throwing his movement's militant energy behind the 2015-16 popular demonstrations against governance failure and corruption. Sadrists had stormed the Iraqi parliament, after it failed to act on Sadr's ultimatum to form a non-party 'technocratic cabinet.' Sadr has projected a non-party technocratic cabinet as the solution to a sectarianized polity that breeds sectarianism and corruption. Taking a cue from Sadr, Fatah's election campaign had also adopted the anti-corruption rhetoric and projected PMUs as an indigenous Shi'i Iraqi nationalist force, which defended Iraq in face on the existential threat posed by the ISIS.

When the recent wave of protests entered the second week, Sadr called on the winning political parties in the election to suspend all political dialogues for forming coalitions until they meet protesters' rightful demands.¹¹ Even as Muqtada al-Sadr had embraced politics of protests, rooted in support for anti-corruption movements, extolling of Iraqi nationalism and opposition to Iranian influence in Iraq, as the leader of the largest parliamentary bloc, he is now under increasing pressure to carry out the reforms his electoral campaign promised.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani: the Guardian of the Democratic Process

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani is widely acknowledged as the most influential votary of people-driven politics in Iraq. The Najaf authority under the leadership of Sistani preferred to not involve in politics, except for intervening in major issues affecting civil peace, national unity and survival of state. In 2004, he successfully intervened to pressurise the occupation authorities to go for an elected constitutional assembly instead of a nominated one. In early 2014 he asked the Dawa Party to find a Prime Minister with wider national acceptance instead of Nouri al-maliki of Dawa party - who had been prime minister for two terms and was widely seen as a sectarian figure -- and later in June, 2014, he issued a *fatwa* 'to all-able bodied Iraqis' to defend the nation, after ISIS captured Mosul and advanced towards the capital.¹² These interventions underline his adherence to Shi'ite democratic tradition dating back to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1906-11.¹³

As *marjaiyya* (source of religious emulation) with massive following among Iraqi Shi'i, Sistani's support would be crucial for reforming Iraq's flawed political structure that has stalled Iraq's path to democracy. In a Friday sermon within days of the starting of protests, Sistani blamed the corrupt officials for the mismanagement of resources which left the Iraqis living a precarious life: 'Had officials properly invested finances and expertise away from petty calculations and stood against corruption, we would not be witnessing such tragic circumstances today.' He urged the 'federal and local government to deal seriously with the demands of citizens,' while also calling on demonstrators to refrain from violence.¹⁴ After Muqtada al-Sadr stopped the government formation talks amid intensifying protests, it was Sistani, who commanded that 'Iraq

must urgently form a new government, and the next Prime Minister must launch a relentless war against the corrupted and those who protect them.”¹⁵

Conclusion

The recurring violent protests targeting the political party offices and provincial council buildings – symbols of the Post-Saddam political process -- in various cities are a rebuff to the political process which has empowered religious-sectarian political parties, with little incentive and inclination for improving governance structures. Given that the majority of the Shi’ite Islamist parties in Iraq maintain ties with Iran at various levels of intensity, the concentration of the protests in the Shi’ite triangle of Basra-Amara-Nassiriyah is significant for the challenge it poses to the conformist sectarian party politics and also the interventionary role of Iran in supporting these parties for its own geopolitical ends. These protests in the Shi’ite heartland targeting Shi’ite parties and demanding government accountability and a political system capable of governance have an intra-Shi’ite dimension, which may have the effect of pushing post-Saddam Iraqi political culture out of its sectarian mould towards issue-based politics. However, the support of Grand Ayatollah Sistani would be instrumental if this emergent politics from below is to succeed in challenging the entrenched ethno-sectarian power-sharing system and reform Iraq’s democratic institutions.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

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