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Iraqi Political Parties: From the Reign of Ideology to the Rule of Chaos

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The history of Iraq's political parties helps contextualize why Iraq's current political scene is so fragmented, and what remains missing.

On August 23, 1922, exactly a year after Faisal I bin al-Hussein was crowned king of Iraq, anti-imperialist political activist Ja'far Abu al-Timman received official approval to establish an Iraqi political party known as the Iraqi National Party. In fact, Abu al-Timman's party was not the first of its kind; it had been preceded by other political parties and associations that also called for independence, sovereignty, and state-building, but which had not been officially authorized. In 2021—99 years later—a young man named Talal al-Hariri received authorization to establish the 25 October Movement, calling for a liberal nationalism grounded in capitalist economic principles, normalized relations with Israel, and the eradication of religious parties—all of which stirred up controversy in Iraq.

Iraq's political trajectory over the last hundred years has witnessed a vast array of parties and ideas, conflicts and coups, setbacks and slogans, and political cleavages and bloody wars. Over the course of such a tumultuous and variable political history, Iraq's political scene has developed without a clear, unifying direction, and that lack of direction has manifested today in a fragmented array of political parties. As parliamentary elections approach, set for October 2021, and the May 1 deadline to register coalitions and blocs has now past, the dynamism of Iraq's political parties is paramount. Iraqis are hoping for a government that is new, honest, and functional, but the splintered Iraqi political scene could mean more of the same. A brief history of Iraq's political parties helps to contextualize why Iraq's current political scene is so fragmented, and what has been missing from Iraq's political scene until now.

From Parlor-room Parties to Ideological Associations

During the monarchical era (1921-1958), Iraq's political parties were largely parlor-room parties, produced through alliances among middle-class bourgeoisie and feudalists with nationalist leanings. As such, these parties generally represented the aspirations of Iraq's social and political elites.

After the Iraqi Republic was founded in 1958, the dynamic of parlor-room parties gave way to more popular participation in political parties. During that time, the army's role in politics expanded, and grassroots ideological parties became prevalent. Parties under the Iraqi Republic based themselves more among the poorer sections of society, finding support among youth, workers, and peasants. These parties took over the political scene through wide-reaching popular support and influence, though they had imported much of their ideologies from abroad.

The Communist-Nationalist-Islamist Triumvirate

The period of the Iraqi Republic was generally a departure from the relative political stability of the monarchical era. The conditions in the nascent Iraqi republic spurred the Iraqi populace to participate in ideologically motivated political movements and upheavals that drove masses to the streets and resulted in periods of violence. And as political life became characterized by confrontations and struggles over power, political parties receded, and Iraq witnessed a series of bloody conflicts, especially between the Baathist and the communist elements.

Various infamous armed militias appeared during this time, including the Popular Resistance, the communist-affiliated Iraqi Democratic Youth Federation, and the Baathist-affiliated Nationalist Guard, which reflected a mix of violence, ideology and street unrest. Together, these three groups came to dominate the Iraqi political scene, which witnessed ongoing conflict between the Baathists and the communists on the one hand, and the Baathists and Islamists on the other. With time, the focus of this political competition shifted primarily to the struggle between Iraq's communist Baathist factions, and the National Progressive Front (NPF). Violent conflicts continued between the three ideological parties until the Baath Party came to power in 1973.

After the creation of the NPF, Iraq ostensibly saw a shift away from the frenetic political conflict that had plagued the country under the Iraqi Republic. In the place of that struggle, Iraqi political life came under the new concept of the 'ruling party,' crystalized in the form of the NPF, which Iraq's Baathists used to establish a monopoly on power in the country and mercilessly suppress their opponents. Though dominated by Baathist leadership, the NPF included the Iraqi Communist Party, a small part of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and other small parties. The purpose of the NPF was to swallow up these parties, assimilate Iraq's various ideologies, and fully dominate the Iraqi political scene.

Nonetheless, Islamist elements had not disappeared from Iraq's political world. Baathist efforts to effectively dominate Iraqi politics clashed with the rapidly-growing Iraqi Islamic movement, and the Islamist opposition to the Baathists drove the Baathist party to play down secularism and socialism during its last decades in power. The Baathists were largely unsuccessful in this goal, and Baathist leadership was unable to meet popular demands before U.S. forces removed Baathist ruler Saddam Hussein from power in 2003.

Democracy without Democrats

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003 and following more than three decades of Baathist rule, a new Iraqi state was established under the aegis of the United States. The stated objective of this new state was a democratic, stable Iraq. However, despite efforts towards a liberal, democratic Iraqi government, the new democratic Iraq had not inherited practical political experience in how to run a state, and Iraq's new government did not possess an institutional understanding of the international political system.

Instead, Iraq's new rulers inherited institutions that had almost completely collapsed, and Iraq became a rogue state dominated by politicians with illusions of power and control. The country became engrossed in fascist-nationalist ideology, and Iraq became isolated from the region. Moreover, Iraqi leadership's knowledge of good governance did not extend beyond a theoretical level, and this deficiency in real-world experience would later become clear when the influence of parties and ideologies turned out to be stronger than that of the state itself.

As such, after Iraq emerged from the ideological triumvirate that had characterized the republican era, the country entered a more open and chaotic period of political diversity that has often engendered political violence. After 2003, the conflicts that had previously existed within the NPF transferred to the institutions and administration of the inner circles of government. In that sense, Iraq did not really benefit from the warming of relations with the international community, and it did not thrive in the new democratic climate.

Today, more than seventeen years since the fall of Baathist ideology and rule, new liberalist parties have still not emerged to fill the liberal political space that has become known as the political process. Rather, other political parties, factions, and forces have taken over the political arena in Iraq, and their political ideas, administration, and organization are often flimsy and unwieldy. Overall, these parties have promoted Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish identities as alternatives to common citizenship.

As a result, the Iraq's political situation has reached a stalemate that Iraq has not been able to overcome in spite of efforts to reform and rebuild. This political stasis has reached such a degree that the state nearly collapsed during large protests that took place during the September 2019 uprising, which resulted in the fall of then Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government. And as elections approach in 2021, the aftermath of those protests, mixed with pre-existing political dysfunction, has meant a proliferation of political parties and potentially even vaguer prospects for progress and stability.

Gambling on the Upcoming Elections

Today, after the impact of the 2019 protests and the fall of the Abdul-Mahdi government, parties and forces that traditionally dominated the political scene—especially political Islam—have declined in popularity. In reaction, these traditional parties and political forces have tried to revive their influence by modifying their tactics and strategies, attempting to use money, demography, and foreign involvement to absorb the 2019 protest movement and its leading figures into their own structures. In addition, perhaps the more concerning result of the 2019 protest movement has been the increase in the number of officially registered political parties in Iraq, which is now home to more than 400 registered parties.

Generally, these parties reflect political currents that can be classified into three groups: traditional, defecting, and dissenting. Traditional parties such as the Wa'y Movement, and the Marhala Party and Iinjaz movement, of course, remain in line with historically dominant political currents like communism and political Islam. Meanwhile, defecting parties, such as the Furatayn Party, the Wa'y Movement, and the Marhala Party function as extensions of traditional parties that, while adhering to many traditional values, have adopted new approaches. Dissenting parties such as Aimtidad movement, Albayt Alwatani, and October 25th movement, on the other hand, are groups that have emerged out of the October 2019 uprising and do not claim adherence to traditional values or parties like defecting parties do.

With all their various viewpoints and agendas, all these groups are preparing for the upcoming elections, which will be the most crucial and perilous elections in Iraq since 2005. Nonetheless, in spite of intense competition and the momentum towards the upcoming elections, a key question remains unanswered: what happens after activists

become members of government? Furthermore, what happens after internal and external political agreements produce a new prime minister? Will everyone get behind the regime in order to ensure it stays in power, or will there be greater popular pressure to produce a new political system with new rules that go beyond the triumvirate of monarchy, republic, and democracy that has characterized the last century of Iraqi politics?

In October, Iraq will begin a new century of its political history in an escalating electoral conflict that many hope will create a new Iraq. Even so, the current situation and the fragmentation and fragility of Iraq's political parties do not bode well for the future. Unfortunately, it may be the case that Iraq's political scene continues to transition without really changing in a meaningful way. ❖



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