

# The Tishreeni Movement Continues: Change Is Inevitably Coming to Iraq

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Iraq's Tishreen movement, driven by a reduced fear of political authority, is reshaping Iraqi politics by injecting fear of the popular will into the political elite.**

The other day, a Mexican graduate student writing his thesis on the October 2019 (Tishreen) uprising and its effect on sectarianism in Iraq visited me to discuss the movement. He posed two key questions: is Tishreen over? And has the level of sectarianism increased or decreased in Iraq since the movement began? I answered that it is certain that Tishreen—however, it is described, as a revolution, uprising, or popular protest —continues, and remains strongly present in the political and social scene. To understand how this movement will continue to shape the future of Iraq's political scene, it is important to understand what sets Tishreen apart from other political currents and what makes it unique.

I do not want to point out what Tishreen has accomplished up to now as the first popular movement in Iraq to force the government to resign. And I do not want to focus on how it forced the parliament to enact a new elections law with a new electoral commission and hold early elections that produced a major change in the foundations of Iraq's political landscape. As a result the largest winning bloc in parliament, the Sadrists, refused to ally with the rest of the Shia blocs, as it had done in the past.

Rather, I want to explain the inputs that led to these outputs, and which inputs are still interacting with the system to this day. I expect that the motivating forces that defined the beginnings of the Tishreen movement will bring about a greater change in the Iraqi political system. Tishreen was not only a protest movement against poor services and mismanagement. It was an independent Iraqi youth movement seeking a better tomorrow for the youth and for Iraq. The movement did not demand that the government give the Iraqi people rights and it did not wait for the

government to do so. Nor did it raise any slogans demanding electricity, water, and services. Rather, it pushed forward the slogan: “I’m coming out to take my rights.”

There is another important matter that sets Tishreen apart from the Arab Spring revolutions, the popular revolution in Iran against the Shah, or other popular movements that overthrew various regimes in the world. Despite the claims we have heard and continue to hear about the overthrow of the quota political system in Iraq, the Tishreen movement did not work towards a coup against the entire political system. In fact, the Tishreenis focused on reforming and modernizing Iraq’s current political system in a way that preserves its democratic structural foundations on one hand and changes its functional working rules on the other.

Tishreen is indeed fundamentally a movement to reform the system, not change it. And despite the recent rise in the percentage of those who aspire for Iraq to be ruled by a strong leader who does not care about parliament by two-thirds according to the **Iraqi Opinion Thermometer survey** (<https://iiacss.org/ar/iot-march22/>), the majority of Iraqis (around 60%, according to the same poll) ultimately support the democratic system. More than that, approximately 70% of Iraqis, according to the latest **Arab Barometer survey** (<https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool/>), believe that despite all the flaws of democracy, it is the best system of government. In other words, Tishreen does not want to go back to dictatorship or any form of theocracy, which only 40% support, or military rule, which 45% support, according to the 2019 **World Values Survey** (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>). Tishreen is not against the peaceful transfer of power stipulated by Iraq’s 2005 constitution. It did not call for the overthrow of the constitution, but rather raised the slogan of overthrowing the corrupt political class, kleptocratic system, and quotas, which were applied customarily and not officially.

Another important and unique feature of Tishreen—which many consider to be a weakness, but I count as a strength—is the lack of a strong political party to lead and direct the movement. We have seen what the parties of political Islam did in the Arab Spring revolutions and the 1979 Iranian revolution, how they took control of them and led them in the direction of obtaining power for themselves rather than the people. The most powerful thing about Tishreen is that it broke the barrier of the fear of authority and constructed a barrier of the authority’s fear of the people.

The great insistence by Muqtada al-Sadr not to ally with those he called corrupt, and the rise of a large number of independents to parliament—although they have not yet proven their effectiveness—as well as the great confusion that has struck the performance and discourse of the parties controlling power in Iraq can all only be explained as resulting from Tishreen. The movement has become fixed and present in the minds of all Iraq’s politicians, and certainly its people.

This fact of Tishreen’s continued presence to date has not only expressed itself politically, but also when it comes to sectarianism. Tishreen has greatly undermined the possibility of politically exploiting sectarianism, although it has not yet been eliminated. It is true that Tishreen was a Shia-majority youth movement, despite the active participation of Sunni youth as well. However, it did not use any sectarian slogans. On the contrary, it was a revolution or uprising against the Shia-led regime. Moreover, the movement represented popular will; the percentage of support for the Tishreen protests reached 60%, according to a survey conducted by the **Independent Institute (IIACSS)** (<https://iiacss.org/the-situation-in-iraq-feb-2021/>) (<https://iiacss.org/the-situation-in-iraq-feb-2021/>) in 2020, and did not differ between Sunni and Kurdish regions compared to Shia regions. Perhaps this non-sectarian influence is what made Muqtada al-Sadr insist on a longitudinal, cross-sectarian alliance with the Kurdish Democratic Party and Sunni Sovereignty Alliance.

To sum up, whoever believes that Tishreen has ended, or is even paused, does not understand how the movement is unfolding. Tishreen is one of the models of a great popular movement whose results are not only measured by

immediate changes. The spirit of Tishreen and its principles, and the fear of it, has penetrated deeply into the political process. It has become a living example for Iraqis of the people's ability to make change. This does not mean that Tishreen has had enough—it still has a long way to go, as the French Revolution did before it.

All the political signs emerging from the corridors of the Green Zone on one hand, and from discussions of the parties that will form the next government on the other, indicate that the chances of the volcano erupting once more are strong. This time, I believe a better understanding will be held between the Tishreen of the independent youth and the Tishreen of the Sadrist youth, who together unleashed the 2019 movement together, then later disagreed. If that happens (which I expect), the extent of the effect and rate of change will be deeper and faster than before, and the actual impact of Tishreen will move to most of Iraq's governorates north of Baghdad.

Nevertheless, I must issue a warning about the possibility of Iraq turning into some form of totalitarian regime or chaos, as happened with some of the Arab Spring revolutions. If that happens, it will not be because Tishreen and its youth want such an outcome, but because the existing regime ignores the calls for change and insists on repressing the movement or demonizing it as some of the agencies and media voices in power are trying to do now. When those who rise up, supported by more than 60% of the Iraqi people, reach the conclusion that this regime, which they hate and want to get rid of, cannot be escaped with an uprising or peaceful transfer of power, they will cooperate with any force—in the literal sense of the word—to change the regime, without carefully considering what alternatives this may bring about. ❖

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