

# Political Opposition in Iraq: Between Reform and Regime Change

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Abbas Abboud Salem is an Iraqi writer and journalist with a master's degree in political science. He has held several significant positions in the field of audiovisual and print media, and his work has appeared in over a dozen Arabic newspapers. He has written four published books.



Brief Analysis

## Iraq's model of opposition traditionally focuses on ideological frameworks and regime change at the expense of working within the political system to effect change.

In most long-standing and emerging democracies, the opposing political parties typically challenge the ruling party via the political system by competing for office and monitoring the government's performance. However, Iraqi opposition parties have not taken this approach. Instead, their objective has been to effect regime change by any means possible and to develop ideological frameworks that could theoretically determine the shape of the alternate regime.

With this in mind, the trajectory of opposition parties and forces has largely been focused on removing the regime and exposing the violations and oppressive acts it has committed, not working within the political system to push for individual policy changes. The prevailing political culture in Iraq has long been subject to totalitarian structures, which makes it hard for Iraqis to accept the idea that the opposition and current government could work together within state institutions. In a totalitarian framework, the regime and its adversaries are located at opposite ends of the spectrum and do not come together except to negotiate a temporary truce.

Even though Iraq's fragile democracy has changed Iraqis' perspectives on many issues, the concept of the opposition has remained static. After Iraqis chose a parliamentary government instead of one dominated by the executive authority during constitutional formation—avoiding a model that evoked the legacy of autocracy, Iraqis finally gained the political freedoms they had been hungry for.

Political parties likewise tried to adapt to the new political environment and vied to expand their influence and power. However, the democratic regime in Iraq has not resulted in a strong state, effective governance, or media institutions that could foster a culture of diverse viewpoints. Political activity takes place without an appropriate

political milieu to support it. Most political figures and their popular bases have failed to differentiate between competition and conflict, debate and constructive dialogue, victory and responsibility, or between belief in the transfer of power and a desire to exclude opposition. One of the major shortcomings of the Iraqi political system is the lack of a political equilibrium between the government and the opposition.

Iraqi politics has tried to move beyond the ruling party/opposition dichotomy and adopted a quota- and consensus-based system that distributed top positions within the state among various sectarian and ethnic groups and their corresponding political entities. This system is based on two criteria. The first is the group's quota, which depends on the relative size of the ethnic or religious group (Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, and Turkmen, among other minorities). The second is the size of the group's political forces and their number of seats in the Council of Representatives. Each group has more than one political bloc representing it that competes for their share of power.

The system mandates a Kurdish president, a Shia prime minister, and a Sunni Arab speaker of the parliament. These groups share quotas for deputy positions, whereas ministerial and administrative roles are given to Turkmen, Christians, and other minorities. This allows for the government to appear more representative of all the segments of the Iraqi society.

From the first (2005) until the fifth session (2021) of the Council of Representatives, Iraq's politicians have not been able to do away with the consensus-based model of governance despite ongoing calls for a majority government. The quota system has been widely criticized as incompatible with the spirit of democracy. Yet some see the consensus-based model as a short-term solution to stave off chaos, civil war, or further political exclusion, and contend that the opposition has failed to fully develop and exert sufficient influence. In examining the Iraqi political scene from 2003 to 2022, it will be useful to divide the organized political opposition into four main typologies, some which sit squarely within the traditional model of Iraqi opposition and some that could evolve into a more effective opposition were they to adopt an adjusted understanding of their role in the Iraqi political process.

### **Opposition outside the political process:**

This opposition has made its position clear and boycotted the political process from the beginning. It was initially composed of the old guard from the Ba'ath party and former military leaders as well as some extremist groups that had been targeted by the new political regime. It did not have a popular following at first but today is considered the most dangerous strand of the opposition. This is because it holds the views of the traditional opposition in the Iraqi totalitarian context, i.e., to overthrow rather than reform the regime.

Over the years, participation in elections has dropped to record lows, while unemployment, poverty, and corruption have risen. Access to basic services remains limited, the state is unable to absorb the new generation, and politicians have failed to follow through on their promises to reform and build society.

In light of the above, this kind of opposition has grown and developed its own political discourse and popular following using social media and several TV channels. Its discourse is directed at stripping the current regime of its moral legitimacy, which depends upon the legitimacy of elections. Instead, it tries to convince the public of the legitimacy of the revolution by focusing on the regime's errors and shortcomings and mobilizing the people to overthrow the regime.

This kind of opposition does not believe in the political process, the post-2003 political institutions, or the legitimacy of elections. Most of its activities occur outside Iraq, primarily in other Arab countries. Its most important leaders and activists are wanted by the authorities, have been sentenced in absentia, are implicated in transitional justice proceedings, and in some cases, support terrorist groups. This kind of opposition adopts rhetoric linked to the Ba'ath party era and has adopted an intentionally inflammatory discourse. Opposition TV stations and websites use both direct and indirect methods to get their message across.

## **Opposition within the government**

This kind of opposition has been part of the political process since its earliest days. It includes partners of the executive authority who have received fewer seats in the Council of Representatives. They hold various posts and positions within the state and use their power to appear regularly in the media in order to turn public opinion against the government or president. They also form coalitions within and beyond the Council of Representatives—not to bring down or to reform the regime, but rather to exert pressure on the president or prime minister. This also enables them to maintain their own popular support and win over new followers since the Iraqi public is sympathetic to this critical and even combative discourse over one that defends and justifies the government's actions.

It is worth noting that this type of opposition contributed to sectarian polarization and erosion of popular trust in unreliable political elites. This opposition is particularly dangerous because some of its leaders are involved in aiding terrorist operations, including Mohammed al-Dainy, a member of the Council of Representatives who was involved in the bombing of the Council's cafeteria in 2007. Minister of Culture Asad al-Hashemi was also involved in the killing of Mithal al-Alusi's two sons in 2005.

This type of opposition is characterized by several main features. Most of its leading figures are members of the Council of Representatives or hold top posts within the state and have developed a critical discourse that questions the prime minister as well as rival political parties. This opposition complains of exclusion and marginalization and accuses the prime minister of promoting autocracy and sectarianism. Members of this opposition belong to important parties that have significant representation in the Council of Representatives, such as the Iraqi Accord Front, which is Sunni, the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Sadrist movement, the Iraqi List, and various Kurdish forces. This opposition uses the state's capacities, including state media, to carry out party activities and get their message across to potential supporters. It has external ties separate from those with the state and sometimes benefits from official state channels for achieving partisan objectives. The force behind this opposition has a changing composition and divergent interests.

## **Popular opposition**

This kind of opposition emerged out of the popular protests after 2003 and is not connected to state institutions. It has involved dozens of protests in Baghdad and the governorates, organized by Iraqi youth seeking better job opportunities and a better life. Some forces and political parties have tried to incorporate this opposition, and to capitalize on and sustain its political momentum. The first groups to begin demonstrating were from the Iraqi Communist Party and the Sadrist movement, which resulted in an electoral bloc composed of the Sadrists and the Communists that ran in the 2018 elections as the Alliance Towards Reform. The political peak for this opposition occurred after the October 2019 protests, when it became a major source of political pressure, and a force to be reckoned with that could not easily be reined in.

This kind of opposition is not organized into a single entity, but rather is composed of various groups of youth, civil society organizations, and unions. Most of its leaders are young, and it includes a significant number of women and some well-known media personalities.

For the most part, the movement does not recognize existing political institutions and rejects all the tenets of, and entities associated with the current political process. Yet instead of categorically opposing the government, it adopts a populist discourse that distances itself from the elites and speaks for the people. The Iraqi public is the secret behind the durability of this opposition and its political clout, which cannot be overlooked. It mobilizes the people for targeted protests and demonstrations and primarily uses social media to coordinate its activities.

## **Opposition within the Council of Representatives**

This is the constitutional model for opposition in established democracies. In this kind of opposition, various political parties, forces, and figures that are not involved in the executive branch of government instead opt to be part of the opposition within the Council of Representatives. This kind of opposition is at the core of democracy and ensures democracy will last. However, it requires trust between different political forces as well as flexibility from the state on respecting the right to hold opposing viewpoints and carry out oppositional activities as part of the democratic process. By contrast, totalitarianism sees opposition as a threat to its authority.

Some political forces have tried to establish this kind of opposition, such as the uprising of a group of representatives under Speaker of the Council of Representatives Salim al-Jabouri. A similar situation occurred with al-Hakim's bloc during the Adil Abdul-Mahdi government, and the State of Law Coalition under Mustafa al-Kadhimi. However, it has not succeeded as a full-fledged opposition since the grassroots movements are still more likely to use their votes towards those in power in government but have turned to this opposition to express their opinions.

This opposition adopts the state's discourse and tries to remind its popular base of its strengths compared to the shortcomings of the current status quo. This open opposition is also short-term, and its leadership is limited to working within the Council of Representatives without participating in the Cabinet. The opposition has its own partisan media as well as a presence on social media. It uses the Council of Representatives' media platforms and works to expand its popular base to prepare for expanding its representation in the Council of Representatives and returning to power.

The above analysis indicates that to establish the necessary conditions for an Iraqi opposition that functions within the democratic system, there needs to be an appropriate milieu regarding the political culture and support of voters for opposition as a concept. The opposition should understand that the existing quota system should shift towards a citizenship-based system that maintains political equilibrium between the opposition and the state, rather than a model seeking a new state system. This involves putting an end to the political behavior of certain forces and their practices of inflaming public opinion and using force for personal gains. They must also realize the significance of public demands, especially on the election day, and work to shape their ideologies to addressing the challenges of the Iraqi public. Likewise, all parties must develop more compelling electoral platforms and ensure the implementation of their electoral promises. If the Iraqi opposition is not able to evolve from its current model, it will remain only an abstraction in this political process where everyone is fighting for their slice of the pie. ❖

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