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Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Iraq

The Role of Civil Society in the 2015 Iraqi Protests

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CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

The popular protest movement in Iraq is known as “protests” instead of “the movement” as other similar movements in the Maghreb and some Arab Mashreq countries such as Lebanon.

These protests occurred in 2011, 2015 and 2018. In 2011, the protests raised the slogan of reforming the political system (Haddad, 2018), not to overthrow or change it, as in the countries where the “Arab Spring” revolutions erupted and called for providing public services, specifically electricity, and providing job opportunities after the unemployment rate reached 16%, according to a study presented by Mazra (2012)¹. In response to these protests, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri Al-Maliki, asked at the time for a 100-day period to implement the required reforms before the demonstrations erupted again and ended after a few months without the demands being met.

In fact, political and economic deals, the spread of corruption and the reinforcement of clientelism in distributing wealth and job opportunities, as well as the adoption of neoliberal policies calling for reducing the role of the state in providing job opportunities in favor of expanding the role of the private sector, which suffers from many obstacles, are the main reasons for the decline in job opportunities and deterioration of services, and led to the outbreak of demonstrations again, in July 2015, which will form the main topic of the present case study.

The present case study aims to reveal civil society’s role, particularly the unemployed, in influencing decision-makers to provide job opportunities and secure services in cities in southern and central Iraq and to demonstrate the new changes that resulted from those demonstrations. The case study used a qualitative research methodology, whereby related literature was reviewed, and focused discussion meetings were organized with participants in the demonstrations in Basra and Baghdad in November 2018, in addition to two interviews in January 2019 with activists; (Ali A.) is a worker in the electricity sector from Basra, and (Sami A.) is an unemployed university graduate from Baghdad.

TIME FRAME OF THE CASE STUDY

The killing of the young man, Montazer Al-Halfi, in the Basra city protests sparked protests in the central Euphrates region (central and southern Iraq) in July 2015, specifically in Baghdad, Dhi Qar, Al Muthanna, Maysan, Babel, Karbala and Najaf, where the majority of Shiites reside (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018).

These protests called for unified economic and political demands in response to the deterioration of services and electricity cuts in a country suffering from high humidity and temperatures reaching 50°C and against Islamic parties’ rule. These protests were joined by participants from different sects, orientations and social and economic groups.

¹ Researcher Najm Qasim Hussein asserts in a study entitled “Poverty and Unemployment in Iraq ... Crisis Syndrome” that the results of the survey conducted by the Ministry of Planning and the Central Statistical Organization indicate that the unemployment rate reached %30 in 2015, while the International Labor Organization estimated it between a quarter and a third of the workforce, while other estimates indicate that it exceeds half of the workforce”, (2016, p.19).

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE UNEMPLOYED

Young people were the main players in these demonstrations, particularly the unemployed ones, temporary workers, students and craftsmen² who belong to various groups that include communist parties, left-wing, civil and secular groups, protest figures, volunteers and activists in civil society organizations such as “Iraqi Hope” and “Culture for All”, women activists in feminist organizations such as “women’s freedom” and “Iraqi women’s rights”, and other organizations defending human rights and the unemployed, in addition to citizens dissatisfied with the economic conditions and endemic corruption.

The civil character and the rejection of the Islamic parties prevailed over these protests, as demonstrators from various sectarian, religious and non-religious affiliations joined them, raising the Iraqi flag as a symbol of the national identity, and the slogan “In the Name of Religion, The Thieves Stole Us” became a unified slogan repeated by the demonstrators in all the cities participating in the protests.

Furthermore, the coordinative entities were formed as an organizational framework to lead the demonstrations in the cities, which Muhammad Al-Taii defines as “administrative gatherings specialized in leading the movement in every governorate. They develop and organize their work to become the official spokesperson, the actual supervisor and the trustworthy guardian of every demonstration and protest within the popular movement” (Al-Taii, 2013). Numerous groups and organizations also emerged that participated in the demonstrations but without working with the coordinative entities, and small groups emerged from them that organize the movements that activists announce and spread on the eve of the demonstrations (a discussion group in Baghdad, November 2, 2018).



Within and outside the coordinative entities, protesters resorted to demonstrations to raise their voices to the decision-makers. They held organized demonstrations in the main squares and streets in the cities of central and southern Iraq. The coordinative entities were organizing the work of their groups. Hence, they decided the number of their spokesmen, wrote the statements to be read to the demonstrators, put up slogans and chants, prepared flags, banners and demand panels, contacted the media, called the masses to demonstrate through social media, set up public speaking platforms where activists cast their speeches and demands and vote delegates to negotiate with government agencies and submit related reports to the public (interview with Ali A.).

THE DEMONSTRATIONS LASTED FOR ABOUT 50 WEEKS, BETWEEN JULY 31, 2015, AND MAY 2016.

Furthermore, demonstrators and activists within the coordinative entities relied on non-governmental media and social media to mobilize the public and urge them to participate in the demonstrations. The satellite channels were conducting debates between the Iraqi government’s activists and representatives about their demands, unlike state television, which did not cover these demonstrations.

The demonstrations of July 2015 witnessed remarkable political developments, represented by the support of the Sadrist movement, led by Muqtada Al-Sadr, and its call for the government to reform, a position that was welcomed by the Iraqi Communist Party and other cultural elites, against its condemnation by other groups, which led to the emergence of differences in the ranks of the demonstrators and their division, thus negatively affecting the protests and demands that have been raised since the last year’s summer, and the prevalence of “despair, lack of hope and frustration among many of the demonstrators”, as explained by some activists (Sami, PBUH).



Night demonstrations in Basra calling for providing electricity (source: Alsumaria TV).

STRATEGIES INFLUENCING DECISION MAKERS

According to Faleh Abdel-Jabbar, although the protests began spontaneously, they went through four phases similar to the social movements in other countries, namely: 1) a feeling of resentment and discontent, 2) the emergence of a consensus on demands between the discontented and protesters, 3) the formation of specialized bodies to ensure the continuation of protest events and activities, 4) the political results of the protests, i.e., their successful or failed end (Abdel-Jabbar, 2018, p.10).

² A discussion group was held in Basra on November 2018, 5, attended by eight young people, some of whom are university graduates, others are unemployed, and others are owners of crafts such as construction, in addition to a civil servants and temporary workers.

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

The Iraqi protests have gone through many variables. On the one hand, the statement of Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbalai, the official entrusted of the Shiite religious authority Ali al-Sistani, in the sermon of August 7, 2015, i.e., one week after the demonstrations, had a direct impact on the subsequent events, as he declared that the Iraqi government must respond to the demands of the demonstrators, especially after the political parties affiliated with it were unable to provide any services to citizens.

As a result, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced a “reform package” on August 9, 2015, just two days after the Friday sermon, but the protests did not stop and continued for other months.

On the other hand, a second factor influencing the course of the protests emerged, which is the Sadrist movement’s joining it, raising slogans and additional demands, such as changing the High Electoral Commission accused of corruption, tampering with voting results and the threat by arms³ (Salem, 2018). However, we will not address the impact of the Sadrist movement’s participation in these protests for being unrelated to this paper’s topic paper.

TRANSFORMATION'S MOMENT

The entry of the Sadrist movement played a role in changing the course of the protests. While some of the demonstrators led by the Iraqi Communist Party and some educated elites welcomed this coalition, cooperation and coordination with the Sadrist movement, which has mobilizing power in the street and negotiating ability with the rest of the parties in the Iraqi government, others considered that cooperation with one of the parties participating in the legislative authority with 35 members and 5 ministers in the executive authority, is one of those responsible for the mistakes committed by the government, which is rejected.

The demonstrators refused the entry of clerics and religious parties into the demonstrations (interview with Sami A.S.), which led to the emergence of a group of demonstrators calling themselves “civilians”, as an advertisement of their civil identity, facing another group supporting the participation of the Sadrist movement and calling itself “We continue”.

On the other hand, the Iraqi Sadrist-Communist agreement resulted in “the emergence of a state of loss within the civil society, which witnessed successive divisions and loss of confidence due to the presence of internal opposition to the existing alliance”, according to the interview conducted with (Sami A) in Baghdad. Some Communist Party figures and some close figures to it, and some civil parties welcomed that alliance with “pessimism” concerning its chances to succeed in achieving meaningful reforms” (Robin, 2018). In an interview after the elections in May 2018 elections, British academic Benedict Robin noted that “it must be recognized that many actors within the civil society considered the coalition of communists and the Sadrists a strategic catastrophe and a betrayal of the identity and goal of civil orientation. They feared that the Islamists would control the protest movement, exploit it to their political interest, and eventually end civil society. They found it unrealistic to expect the Sadrists, who had been a part of the corrupt political system for many years, to begin reforming the system” (ibid.).

Despite all these contradictions and criticisms, the Iraqi Sadrist-Communist cooperation resulted in the formation of the “Walking Towards Reform” coalition on January 17, 2018, during a conference held at the Sheraton Hotel in the capital Baghdad (Al-Jazeera, 2018), which won the elections in the same year.

POLITICAL RESULTS

The political results of the 50-week demonstrations can be summarized as follows:

First, economically, the lack of new reforms would respond to the demands for which the demonstrations erupted. Despite the issuance of the “reform package” and the state of concern that the protests raised against the government, especially after the Shiite authority supported it, none of the demands that were raised to provide job opportunities and public services such as electricity and combatting corruption were fulfilled. Rather, the government embarked upon the privatization of electricity to solve the resulted crisis, which provoked different reactions, noting that the Sadrist movement supported this decision and described it as positive privatization, but the demonstrators protested against it. Furthermore, no clause has been implemented in the “reform package” that promised “a comprehensive and immediate reduction in the number of protections allocated to all state officials, the removal of senior positions from partisan and sectarian deals, a professional committee appointed by the Prime Minister to select candidates according to competencies and integrity, and to abolish positions of the three vice presidents and the three deputy prime ministers”.

Second: Changing the political discourse of the Islamic parties and religious authorities, after the demonstrations revealed the extent of the protesters’ discontent against the Islamic parties, whether by raising slogans or by refusing their interfere, especially in the first months of the demonstrations, which prompted these parties to change their political rhetoric. In fact, Ammar Al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq, withdrew from his organization and formed the party of wisdom and shifted his rhetoric towards the “new Islam”. The Iraqi Islamic Party, the Iraqi wing of the Muslim Brotherhood Party, took the initiative to change its name to the “Civil Reform Party”. New civil parties were established and called for a civil state, even by Islamic parties.

On the other hand, the Shiite cleric, Sayyid al-Sistani called for voting based on competence and not identity (Abd al-Jabbar, 2018, p.8), especially after the protest movement created a platform to end political sectarianism that politicians took advantage of to consolidate their power and influence, bearing in mind that strengthening this party contributes to weakening the ability of the Islamic parties to exploit the societal identities for their interest (Abdel-Jabbar, 2018, p.24).

³ In the elections in May 2018, the High Electoral Commission was accused of corruption, burning ballot boxes and tampering with results, which prompted Al-Abadi to fire 5 of the Commission staff.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

First: The case study shows that civil society and political activists are intertwined by nature, and they were major players in Iraq after 2003. For instance, the Sadrist movement has parliamentary and ministerial seats within the authority. At the same time, it played a role in civil society, crossing the boundaries between political and civil societies. On the other hand, civil activists became members of political blocs that participated in the parliamentary elections, such as the Communist Party. This fact confirms what Marx indicated that “everyone plays a dual role, once as a member of a civil society and once as a member of a political community” (Jichang, 2015, p.71).

Second: The necessity for the demonstrators to distance themselves from the “policy of chance” (Kerbaj, 2017) and to get close to slogans and specific demands agreed upon by the majority of the protesting youth, which can be stressed on to identify the extent of their ability to verify and track their implementation by the government without deviating from it or allowing its influence on the course of the demonstrations, such as focusing on providing job opportunities and electricity, which are among the most prominent demands of the demonstrations, and not mixing them with other political goals such as changing the Independent High Electoral Commission, especially that the diversity of demands distracts attention and loses the social movement’s strength to influence decision-making.

Third: Despite the presence of coordinative entities in the governorates and bonds in the neighborhoods, the social movement needs unified organizational and leadership frameworks to prevent its dispersion, open a permanent discussion to secure a minimum level of harmony around the demands and limit the individual conflicts and narcissistic tendencies that prevailed during the demonstrations.

Fourth: The election of coordinative entities and committees by the demonstrators directly and granting them the right to remove any of the coordination members or committees if they deviate from the group’s will, to preserve the objectives of the demonstration and the independence of the bodies representing the demonstrators, prevent exclusivity in decision-making within the coordinative entities and committees, and preserve the power of the protesters’ influence on decision-makers.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

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