ALSHARQ FORUM

EXPERT BRIEF
REGIONAL POLITICS
26 DECEMBER 2019

A Crisis of Governance: Explaining Iraq's Protest Movement

KAMARAN PALANİ

Source: Anadolu Agency

Abstract: **What are the root causes of the current protests in Iraq? What implications do the protests have for state-society relations? And what can be done? what is happening in Iraq reflects a deep crisis of governance in the country, which is an outcome of an ethno-sectarian power-sharing, an oil-dependent economy and deeply fragmented security forces.**

Introduction

Despite many constraints on popular participation, social mobilization in Iraq has been an important yet understudied phenomenon ever since regime change in 2003. In Iraq, protests and demonstrations have posed serious challenges and had a significant impact on the emergent political landscape particularly since 2011. This has occurred against a backdrop of a dysfunctional political and economic system, as well as deeply fragmented security forces. Since 1st October 2019, protests have continued in Baghdad and other Shia-majority provinces in mid- and southern Iraq, with a wide spectrum of demands, including an end to corruption, better living conditions, Iraq's independence from regional (mainly Iran) and international (mainly the US) powers, and, perhaps most importantly, calling for an end to the entire political system that has been in place in Iraq since 2003. Since the start of protests, over 460 people have been killed, and over 20,000 injured,[1] by the Hashd al-Shaabi armed groups and Iraqi security forces. Violence and casualties are expected to rise further. Though the demands are not sectarian, the protests have largely been contained within Baghdad and the Shia provinces. Although the same problems affect all Iraqi regions, social mobilization has largely reacted to local conditions which are, in turn, part of that system of governance to which ethno-sectarian politics (muhasasa Ta'ifia) has contributed.[2]

Moreover, unlike the previous waves of protest movements in Iraq – such as the February 2011 protests in Iraqi Kurdistan, the 2012-13 Sunni protest camps against marginalization, the 2015-16 protests calling for reform, and the 2018 protests in Basra – the current protests have been characterized by strong public will, popular agency and belief in the power to change, the particularly violent and brutal response of the Iraqi authorities, and the lack of any single political party being behind the protests. In addition, unlike the previous protests, the current movement has been described as an "uprising" and "revolution" by the protestors, challenging political legitimacy and state-society relations. As a result, for the first time since 2003, parts of Iraqi society have begun to label the Iraqi authorities as "the regime", a word with clear ramifications for the people of this region – an authority with no popular support or legitimacy. However, unlike the 2011 Arab Spring protests, the Iraqi protests have not called outright for the end of the system, but more for saving the country (al-watan) from external powers and corrupt local leaders.

While initially the protests mainly expressed socio-economic demands, they have since evolved into a complex situation, revealing deeper frustration and the rejection of the whole political system. In both the short- and the long-term, the protests will have a fundamental impact on Iraq's governing

> ***Since the start of protests, over 460 people have been killed, and over 20,000 injured, by the Hashd al-Shaabi armed groups and Iraqi security forces. Violence and casualties are expected to rise further***

system and political process. However, their most significant implication is the division of the country into two groups, the authorities and the people. It is important to highlight that the protests are leaderless, which has provided more power and meaning to the current movement. However, in the absence of leadership, the current movement has so far been unable to translate its demands into concrete political acts, and the emergence of any real political representation remains to be seen. Until that occurs (if it ever does), the movement will remain vulnerable to being hijacked by competition for power and rivalries between political parties, at both local and regional levels.

The protests, and the violent response of the Iraqi authorities, have come as a shock to many, as the formation of the current government after the 2018 parliamentary elections was seen as a milestone in Iraq's transition from years of war to the peaceful processes of nation- and state-building. It took months of intensive negotiations between the victorious blocs in parliament to reach a political agreement. One year ago, there was almost ubiquitous optimism regarding the new government's potential to move the country forward, with the government benefiting from (1) the declaration of a military victory over the Islamic State, (2) the prevention of the separation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the dissolution of the country, and (3) the presence of "moderate" faces in the government, such as Adel Abdul Mahdi and Barham Salih as Iraqi Prime Minister and President respectively. There was also a belief that Iraq would not be among the priorities of Western powers as a country of deep humanitarian concern; interestingly, some believed that Iraq could become a "bridge" bringing together regional powers.[3] A year later, on 1st December 2019, Abdul Mahdi resigned under the pressure of the protestors, and the country, specifically Baghdad and the Shia-majority provinces in mid- and southern Iraq, are approaching chaos. The question is, what has gone wrong?

> ***It is important to highlight that the protests are leaderless, which has provided more power and meaning to the current movement. However, in the absence of leadership, the current movement has so far been unable to translate its demands into concrete political act***

> *What is occurring is the accumulation of frustration about the lack of progress since 2003, and is a reflection of deep crises of representation, governance and belonging*

How can the protests be understood?

To understand the root causes of the current protest movement, and its impact on the country, we need to place it within Iraq's broader crisis of governance in three main areas: politics, security and economy. What is happening now is not merely the people rejecting a specific policy or political party, but the very meaning of the existing Iraqi governance, authority, the political class, and their claims of legitimacy. What is occurring is the accumulation of frustration about the lack of progress since 2003, and is a reflection of deep crises of representation, governance and belonging. It is true that socio-economic drivers were central in triggering collective action in the first place, but the problem is much wider. The underlying explanation to the root causes of the 2019 protest movement in Iraq is that the political system that has been in place since 2003 is not working; but the question remains as to which aspect of the system has contributed to weakness and dysfunctionality of the whole governing system.

1- Government:

At the political level, the post-2003 political system in Iraq centered on a consensual power-sharing arrangement among the country's three largest ethno-sectarian groups: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds. According to this informal system of power-sharing in Iraq, the Prime Minister's post is held by the Shia community, a Sunni is the Speaker of Parliament, and a Kurd holds the Presidency. On the ground, this system has constrained attempts for meaningful political and administrative reform. The current President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) Nechirvan Barzani has clearly stated that the political blocs representing Iraq's three main components have been more interested in their respective constituencies, and party politics, than working for the good of the country.[4] The political cadres have proven to be too preoccupied with turning the state into parochial fiefdoms, dominated by ethno-religious or party allegiances, to respond to the wishes of Iraqi citizens. The result is a weak government and a weak PM that do not have a full support of political blocs and parties, therefore unable to counter corruption and address the primary demand of the people: good governance. Moreover, in periods of crisis, Iraq has witnessed only limited unity of action between its key political institutions of President, Prime Minister and Speaker, representing different ethno-sectarian groups. In the case of the current protests, the lack of coordination has been a key barrier to formulating a coherent response that convinces the protestors.

The system has allowed the distribution of posts, but in reality, power has remained in the hands of the dominant Shia political actors. Government posts were shared, but real power was not

Despite the deep structural problems of the power-sharing arrangement, the question must be asked what the alternative may be. This form of political system is not enshrined in the Iraqi 2005 Constitution; its main logic has been ensuring the inclusion and participation of all groups in the post-2003 "new Iraq". The system has allowed the distribution of posts, but in reality, power has remained in the hands of the dominant Shia political actors. Government posts were shared, but real power was not. Protests in 2012-2013 in Sunni-majority areas, rejecting the perceived sectarian rule of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the KRI's 2017 referendum on independence, were also signs that this system has not been able to provide an equal sense of partnership to all. Interestingly, against previously dominant interpretations of Iraqi politics, the 2019 protest movement has also shown that this system does not satisfy the Shia population, even though Shia political actors have been dominant in Baghdad since 2003.

2- Economy

On the economic level, the country's continued dependence on its oil resources has prevented sustainable economic development, which, together with the high level of corruption and public mismanagement, has led to the state being widely perceived as a dysfunctional entity, irrelevant to people's lives. Ninety per cent of Iraq's revenue comes from oil, which two-thirds of the Iraqi budget goes towards the salaries of government employees.[5] With this type of economy, no government in Iraq can provide an easy solution to the demands of the protestors.

3- Security

Iraq does not have unified security and military forces. In addition to the Kurdish Peshmerga and security forces, which operate in a state-within-a-state system, there exist a multitude of security forces, controlling the country's political and security landscape in a non-inclusive fashion. The lack of a unified security force or a "command and control" structure in Iraq's armed forces, may have weakened the country, created a vacuum for terrorism, and, importantly, opened a space for foreign interference. The absence of a unified statutory security force has led opportunist local, hybrid and sub-state forces to proliferate and foster divisive control around the country. These forces have no desire to be integrated into Iraq's regular security forces, each only representing a segment of society, further constraining the development of a

> ***The lack of a unified security force or a "command and control" structure in Iraq's armed forces, may have weakened the country, created a vacuum for terrorism, and, importantly, opened a space for foreign interference***

sense of statehood and attempts at creating national representation and belonging. Most of the protestors of 2019 have been killed by non-state armed groups, with the Iraqi government having limited control over their actions. The majority of these armed groups have strong relations with Iran. It is not only these groups that feel threatened by the protests, but also their regional backer, Iran, which has had significant leverage and power in the country since 2003. Addressing the fragmentation of security is not only a local Iraqi affair.

Authority without popular support

Within a system of ethno-sectarian power-sharing, dysfunctional economy and a fragmented security, the people's distrust in the authorities has increased. As a result, the existing political class in Iraq has to a significant extent lost popular support and legitimacy. Not only the political elites but religious leaders and institutions, such as Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, which have been unable to unify the Shia parties, are now facing serious criticism. After the resignation of Abdul Mahdi, parties have been cautious to nominate a new candidate, indicating their lack of popular support. This also shows that what is contested and even hated is not just a specific politician or policy, but the very meaning of "authority", which will have significant connotations for the future of the country. The problem is, while it is clear that popular support for the political parties is lacking, political actors and armed groups –such as the Sayirun Alliance led by Moqtada al-Sadr, the Fatih Alliance led by Hadi al-Ameri, the Nasir led by Haider al-Abadi, the State of Law led by Nouri al-Maliki, and the Kurdish bloc led by the Barzanis and Talabanis – maintain their hard power through systems of political and sectarian patronage. It is this political class that ultimately forms every new government, perpetuating distrust between the people and political elites, and the absence of social contract. Simply put, in the short term the result is authority without popular support.

In this context, the main question is: do the Iraqi authorities depend on popular support for their political survival, or do they depend external support and/or violence? In the long term, for all actors, internal legitimacy is critical for survival, no matter how hard the leaders try to hold onto power with an iron grip and therefore do not depend on popular support. The old sources and discourses of legitimacy in Iraq, sectarian or ethnic solidarity, now are not enough to ensure popular support. Other sources of legitimacy will be needed, or popular dissatisfaction will prove a threat to the stability and existence of the country. Functioning, inclusive and legitimate governance must replace the discourses that have previously been adopted by the political actors, such as fear and external threat. However, as the analysis above has shown, Iraq does not have short-term

> ***The old sources and discourses of legitimacy in Iraq, sectarian or ethnic solidarity, now are not enough to ensure popular support. Other sources of legitimacy will be needed, or popular dissatisfaction will prove a threat to the stability and existence of the country***

answers to these problems: its fragmented security forces, oil-dependent economy and ethno-sectarian power-sharing, constrain the country's attempts to address the root causes of popular discontent. The most likely scenario in the short term is the continuation of popular dissatisfaction with, and distrust in, Iraq's authorities.

Regarding popular legitimacy and support, the ability of Iraq's political actors to buy popular support varies significantly, as the country is deeply divided. For example, for Hashd al-Shaabi, who are confronting the protestors, the protests not only threatened their interests, but also the very essence of their legitimacy and popularity won during the fight against the Islamic State. Their popularity and victory in the 2018 elections stemmed from their central role in this struggle, yet this has been significantly undermined by their confrontations with the protestors and the credible reports that many protestors have been killed by Hashd al-Shaabi-affiliated groups.[6] For an armed/political organization, such as Hashd al-Shaabi, gaining legitimacy without constructing an "external threat" is not possible. The dynamics of internal legitimacy and popular support for KRI leaders are unique, as Kurdistan operates as a state-within-a-state. Nevertheless, the outcomes of political actors' attempts to gain popular support may all come at the expense of the country's cohesion and sense of national belonging.

To address these deep structural problems, introducing radical political reforms may be seen as a solution, but this is not possible in the short term. Immediate radical reform may be an existential threat to the sources of powers of these parties, as their hold of power has been largely based on patronage and the use of state resources for their political interests. Gradual and long-term reform is possible but will not appease the people. As long as there is a gap between the people and authorities, political, economic and security reforms will be constrained in a vicious circle.

What's next?

In the short term, Iraq has few practical options to address the challenges explained above but increasing pressure from the protestors will require the political class to prioritize serious reforms, a development which is needed for their survival. In this context, any reforms would be more to save themselves than to address the demands

Despite the challenges, popular participation, especially among youth, is evolving in Iraq, and the protests will force the political parties to change their discourses of legitimacy and to communicate with the youthful elements of the Iraqi society

of the population. After the resignation of Abdul Mahdi, according to Article 76 of the 2005 Constitution, the current government would assume a caretaker role for 30 days, or until the largest bloc in Parliament agrees on a new candidate to replace Abdul Mahdi.[7] The largest political alliance would then have 15 days to nominate a new candidate for Prime Minister. The new Prime Minister again requires the vote of the same political parties that formed Abdul Mahdi's government in 2018.

It is unlikely that this outcome would satisfy the protestors, as they have demanded a new election and a complete overhaul of the country's political system. Two main scenarios are likely. First, political blocs, the same parties that appointed the resigned Abdul Mahdi, will appoint a new Prime Minister, to prepare the country for a new election. This is a likely scenario, and the political parties under pressure may allow some immediate political reforms. The main question here concerns how a fragile and deeply fragmented Iraq can move forward when hard-fought elections are likely to exacerbate political conflict, as no major party is ready to concede its power and position in this environment. If the selection of a new Prime Minister requires political agreement between winning blocs, it is unlikely that the new Prime Minister could wield more power than Abdul Mahdi. Abdul Mahdi was not a problem, was a victim: he was independent but not powerful. An independent Prime Minister cannot pursue radical reforms, if his or her independence is not supported by a powerful bloc. Second, another scenario is the escalation of the current instability to chaos and internal fighting between Shia armed groups. In this scenario, Iraq will be more unstable after the protests than before, and more instability and weakness mean more space for foreign interference.

Despite the challenges, popular participation, especially among youth, is evolving in Iraq, and the protests will force the political parties to change their discourses of legitimacy and to communicate with the youthful elements of the Iraqi society. Without this pressure from the population, the Iraqi elites would have had no desire to reform. This pressure is expected to continue countrywide.

Endnotes

1- Death toll in Iraq protests reaches 460, over 17,400 injured: Iraqi rights commission. (2019, Dec 4). Retrieved from https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ac50b001-0952-4c10-9844-c8cacadf4a1a

2- Costantini, I. (2019). The Iraqi protest movement: social mobilization amidst violence and instability. Forthcoming.

3- Blecua, R. (2019, May 29). Battleground or Bridge-Builder? Iraq and the New Regional Order in the Middle East. Retrieved from https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/battleground-or-bridge-builder-iraq-and-the-new-regional-order-in-the-middle-east/

4- Barzani, N. (2019). MERI Forum 2019: Ending Wars – Winning Peace In The Middle East Panel 4: Navigating Kurdistan Region through Evolving Global and Regional Power Dynamics 4-6 November, 2019. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zaQyRaaSjs

5- Fuad Hussein, a speech of Iraq's Finance Minister in a conference in Erbil. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zaQyRaaSjs

6- Cockburn, P. (2019, Oct 7). Iraq protests: Death tolls soars as pro-Iran militias accused of shooting protesters. Retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-protests-baghdad-death-toll-shooting-a9145716.html

7- See Kadhim, A. (2019, Nov 30). The challenges Iraq faces after prime minister's resignation. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-challenges-iraq-faces-in-after-prime-ministers-resignation/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamaran Mohammad Palani is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Research Institute and a Lecturer in International Relations at Salahaddin University in Erbil. Kamaran is also a PhD candidate at Leiden University in the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org

SharqForum /

ALSHARQ FORUM