Iraq between Popular Momentum and Frozen Reforms  
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In July 2015, a major popular uprising was launched in Iraq, starting in the southern province of Basra before sweeping other Iraqi regions. While poor services were the initial trigger of the uprising, it rapidly turned into an expression of popular anger against rampant corruption and abuse of power by top officials. The protests have been youth-led, mostly non-partisan, and notable for their remarkable absence sectarian or ethnic slogans. They have been animated by a new spirit shown through sarcastic slogans, cartoons, and videos circulated via social media networks. The latter have emphasised the demonstrators’ eagerness to combat corruption and incompetence, along with their call to put an end to the post-2003 ethno-sectarian quota system. Over time, however, the uprising’s main instigators have become aware that the lack of centralised leadership had weakened their capacity for action and their ability to impose needed reforms.

In an attempt to show his responsiveness to popular resentment, the Iraqi prime minister announced a set of reforms which have been highly resisted by his political rivals in the parliament and have failed to satisfy the main popular demands. Besides the limited leeway of reform of the current regime, the uprising is facing the challenge of transforming this popular momentum into a coordinated structure that can represent voices of dissent, sustain pressure, and produce significant change.

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Since the end of July 2015 a major popular uprising has erupted in Iraq’s provinces – aside from the territories under the control of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the Kurdish provinces. This protest movement, deemed to be the largest secular popular movement challenging the post-2003 political order in Iraq, has largely departed from the narrow sectarian paradigm that has so far monopolised the analysis of Iraqi politics. This paper examines the uprising’s actors, its slogans, its internal dynamics/organisational structure, and the Iraqi government’s frenetic response to popular demands.

The Uprising’s First Spark

Protests broke out on 16 July 2015 in the southern Iraqi province of Basra, Iraq’s main port situated on the Shatt al-‘Arab waterway, as people spontaneously took to the streets to denounce poor services, and in particular the power outages occurring during the extreme summer heat exceeding 50°C. While supposedly one of the richest Iraqi provinces with its large oil fields and export capacities, its population has been suffering from difficult living conditions and lack of services. The demonstrators burned tyres to cut off the main roads, and stormed and burned the headquarters of the city council and of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a Shi‘ite Islamist political party to whom Basra’s governor Majid al-Nasrawi belongs. Confrontations with security forces led to the death of one of the demonstrators and the injury of two others. The protest movement then spread to other Iraqi provinces and reached Baghdad’s Tahrir Square on 31 July 2015, where civil society activists called for popular mobilisation through social media networks, offering Iraqis, especially youth, a space to present their views, bypass government censorship, and become a channel to challenge the status quo and organise voices of dissent. Going well beyond the denouncing of poor services, the protests turned into an expression of popular anger against rampant corruption, and against abuse of power by top officials that has dearly cost Iraq in its war against IS. Despite the specificity of each province and the protesters’ diversity, their demands have focused on four axes: improving services, fighting corruption and holding officials accountable, reforming the judiciary and the security sector, and reforming the political system in order to tackle senior appointments based on ethnic/sectarian grounds –

generally known as *mahassah* or the quota system. The protests gained momentum during the first week of August when Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani – Iraq’s pre-eminent *marja’* (literally “Source of Emulation,” the highest level of Shi’ite authority) – backed protesters demands and urged Prime Minister Haider al-‘Abadi to “rebel against corruption and sectarianism,” and to “take bold measures in order to fight corruption, and to sack incompetent officials regardless of their party affiliation or sectarian/ethnic background.” 2 Traditionally inclined to preserve political stability, the *marja’iyya* has pushed al-‘Abadi to conduct drastic reforms that could satisfy popular demands. Sistani’s main concern has been to avoid Iraq’s partition 3 and a political vacuum that could eventually be occupied by more radical political forces and pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias if reforms are not properly carried out.

**Anatomy of the Protest Movement**

The 2015 Iraqi protests have been youth-led and relied heavily on non-traditional means of mobilisation, relying on social media networks to organise the protests and disseminate slogans, news, and videos. While young people have constituted the backbone of the protests, they have none the less been considered “popular” as the major bulk of protesters have been non-partisan Iraqi citizens simply rejecting the corrupt political system and the ruling (Shi’ite) elites dominating the political scene since 2003. Nonetheless, independent academics, intellectuals, media professionals and artists have also regularly taken part in the movement, and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and some of its allies within al-Tahaluf al-Madani al-Dimocrati (the Civil Democratic Alliance) 4 have constituted the largest partisan forces present in the protests. Indeed, some ICP members have been deemed among the driving forces of the mobilisation, and have played an active role in the coordination of the protests’ slogans and demands across Iraqi provinces. 5

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4 It was initially formed as an electoral coalition before the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections. The Alliance’s main members are the Iraqi Communist Party, the National Democratic Party, the Iraqi Ummah Party and the People’s Party.

5 Author interview with an Iraqi academic and activist, 23 January 2016.
Sunni and Shi’ite Islamist parties and movements have mostly refrained from participating in the popular mobilisation. As a prominent figure of the Iraqi Communist Party explains, Shi’ite Islamist parties and movements in particular have “considered the protests as targeting and opposing them, thus, many of them have tried to stop or thwart the movement.”

Shi’ite forces have launched a propaganda campaign to counter the protests and make them less credible. They have claimed that the uprising is merely “an external plot to undermine the political process and secularize Iraq” and have accused the activists of being “atheists” (mulhidin) and Ba’athists. By late August, activists and journalists were attacked in Basra, Najaf, and Babil provinces, pointing fingers at some Islamist parties who were said to have sent their militias/men to intimidate activists and discourage protesters. In Basra, unidentified armed men stormed a sit-in tent, injured two protesters, and distributed leaflets threatening demonstrators. Similarly, men in civilian clothes – claiming to be intelligence officers (without showing badges) – have abducted and beaten demonstrators on many occasions since August 2015. On 18 September, three activists on their way from a demonstration in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square were grabbed, blindfolded, and carried off in a pick-up truck to be subsequently beaten, interrogated separately, and released after signing a pledge not to demonstrate again. They were also threatened with abduction, tortured, and death if they spoke to the media.

At the end of August 2015, Muqtada al-Sadr, the head of the Sadrist Movement, stood out from other Islamist forces by backing the protests and calling his followers to join the popular mobilisation. Asa‘ib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteous), a pro-Iranian armed splinter group of the Sadrist Movement that has participated in the Iraqi insurgency against IS, also sporadically took part in the popular mobilisation in order to strengthen its political position as one of the main Shi’ite militias. Generally known to be critical of al-‘Abadi’s government, Asa‘ib Ahl al-Haq called for the replacement of the current parliamentary system by a presidential one, which could give pro-Iranian political forces and militias a better chance to

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6 Author interview with a prominent figure of the Iraqi Communist Party, 24 January 2016.
8 Ibid.
10 Reuters, 24 August 2015, available at: http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAACK0QT0YP20150824
control the Iraqi political system.11 Its demands, however, did not echo and its participation in the protests gradually waned.

The Uprising through its Slogans

Iraqis have never been as creative in criticizing their political leaders or denouncing their poor living conditions. They have designed cartoons, created sarcastic slogans chanted in the streets, and made videos that been circulated on social media networks. Two emblematic slogans have marked the protests and emphasised their fight against corruption and sectarianism, *bism al-din bakuna al-haramiyya* (“in the name of religion we were robbed by the thieves”) and *hashd*12 *dhid al-irhab wa hashd dhid al-fasad* (“popular mobilisation against terrorism and popular mobilisation against corruption”). Through these slogans, protesters have not only rejected top officials’ corruption but also the instrumentalisation of religion to control power and wealth by the so-called *tujjar al-din* (“merchants of religion”). Instead many demonstrators called for a *dawla madaniyya* (secular state) and a reform of the political system to put an end to the post-2003 ethno-sectarian quota system, thus directly questioning the legitimacy of the current ruling Shi‘ite elites. Moreover, the slogan *Tehran barra barra, Karbala’ tibqa hurra* (“Tehran out out, Karbala’ will become free”) chanted in the streets of the Shi‘ite city of Karbala’ revealed the national, and to an extent even nationalistic, essence of the movement. Sectarian or ethnic slogans have been remarkably absent during the protests – except when some groups tried to infiltrate the protests to create division – and only the Iraqi flag has been raised. The activists have also defied anti-reform forces, who had bet on the rapid decline of the movement, with slogans proving its resilience, chanting *juma’a wara juma’a, al-fasid nittala’uh* (“Friday13 after Friday, the corrupt will be kicked out”) and “*mustamirrun* (“we will continue”).

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12 *Hashd* refers to the popular mobilization forces fighting the Islamic State, with the Iraqi security forces, in northern and western Iraq.

13 Referring to the weekly Friday protest.
Another symbolic slogan, *la qiyada kulluna mutadhahirun* (“no leadership we are all protesters”), reflects one of the main characteristics of the protests but also underscores both the strength and weakness of the movement. The fact that it has been leaderless and not monopolised by any of the well-established political forces has encouraged many Iraqis from all walks of life, regardless of their political affiliation, to take part, rendering the movement a popular uprising in the true sense of the word. In each province, *tansiqiyyat* (organizational committees) have been formed to homogenize slogans and guarantee the pacific character of the protests. For the first months of the uprising, the organization of the protests remained horizontal, without consistent central coordination between provinces. Over time, however, some of the most involved activists became aware that the lack of centralised leadership to coordinate the protests’ slogans and demands and to negotiate on behalf of the protesters with the Iraqi government had weakened their capacity for action and their ability to impose needed reforms. Thus, in early September some of the activists of Baghdad’s Tahrir Square held a press conference to announce the election of representatives among the activists to organise protests and convey popular demands.\(^\text{14}\) Despite the fact that no elected bodies emerged, it was a first attempt towards better organisation of the movement. In the same vein, some activists tried to enlarge the uprising’s popular base by consolidating their alliance with pro-reform Islamist forces. They attempted to capitalise on Ayatollah al-Sistani’s support for the protests, multiplying visits and meetings with al-Sistani’s representatives in Najaf, in order to rally modest Shi’ites who were generally very leery about the uprising’s secular slogans. Similarly, by the end of November 2015, they held a meeting with Muqtada al-Sadr who called on the Iraqi government to protect protesters and satisfy their demands. Yet while some of the secular activists have believed that an alliance with the Sadrists could be conceivable, given the latter’s popular base among modest Shi’ite populations and its leader’s pro-reform and anti-corruption stances,\(^\text{15}\) others have never approved this strategy and have refused any coordination with Islamist political forces.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^\text{16}\) Author interview with an Iraqi academic and activist, 23 January 2016.
Since the end of 2015 coordination meetings between tansiqiyat have been taking place more frequently within each province and across provinces. Following a meeting held in Basra on 22 January 2016, the organizational committees of ten Iraqi provinces announced the creation of al-Tagammu’ al-Sha’bi lil Islah wal Taghyyr (the Popular Union for Reform and Change), a unified front calling for the requested popular reforms. More recently, the activists have been also preparing for a larger meeting gathering representatives of all organisational committees in all provinces, thus taking steps towards the “transformation of the uprising into a more homogenous organisational and political structure, while preserving its diversity.” If successful, this is the only strategy which could sustain the movement, make its demands more vocal, and its negotiations with the political elites more efficient.

Al-‘Abadi’s Aborted Reforms

In an attempt to show his responsiveness to popular demands, the Iraqi Prime Minister announced a first set of reforms on 9 August 2015. This was done without consulting the main political forces, even within al-‘Abadi’s own ruling coalition, the State of Law, risking alienating the support needed to implement them. The protesters welcomed al-‘Abadi’s initiative, considering it as a positive though insufficient step, and mandated him to conduct reforms. Following al-Sistani’s call and fearing a public backlash, the Iraqi parliament unanimously approved al-‘Abadi’s reform package on 11 August 2015. It included various administrative and financial axes, namely: reducing the number of guards provided to senior officials to cut back costs; reviewing the payroll system to ensure equality in wages; curtailing ministerial staff by merging or scrapping some ministries; cancelling the posts of vice president and deputy prime minister; disregarding partisan and sectarian quotas in determining senior positions; and creating a committee to select candidates on merit. The last axis of reform aimed to combat corruption by activating the role of the Council on Fighting Corruption (to be chaired by al-‘Abadi himself), launching a campaign called Min Ayn Laka Hadha (“where did you get this from”) and opening investigations on current and previous corruption cases. The ceremonial vice presidential posts

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18 Author interview with a prominent figure of the Iraqi Communist Party, 24 January 2016.
were often considered as a tool for maintaining patronage rather than ensuring effective
governance; scrapping them means depriving al-‘Abadi’s predecessor, the main rival Nouri al-
Maliki, of his position and his patronage network. The same goes for other prominent politicians
like Iyad ‘Allawi (former prime minister) and Usama al-Nujaifi (former speaker of parliament).

At the end of October more than sixty members of the State of Law coalition delivered a letter to
al-‘Abadi urging him to consult them more widely before ordering reforms; otherwise, they
threatened to withdraw their parliamentary support for his reform package. Many of the
lawmakers who signed the letter are Nouri al-Maliki’s supporters within the ruling coalition or
members of pro-Iranian militias.\footnote{Reuters, 29 October 2015, available at: http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-abadi-reforms-idUKKCN0SN14T20151029} Despite the fact that the reforms were officially intended to
combat graft and incompetence, the lack of support they received among al-‘Abadi’s Shi’ite rivals was mainly based on their feeling that the prime minister used the popular uprising and the
marja ‘iya’s support as an opportunity to get rid of his political rivals and establish an alternative

Not all the announced reforms have materialised. The three vice presidents have not left their
positions as the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court deemed in early November 2015 that cancelling the
vice presidential posts was unconstitutional.\footnote{Al-Mada, 2 November 2015, available at : http://www.almadapress.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=58763} The merging and annulment of some ministerial
positions has not been a success either. Some ministers have refused to leave their posts\footnote{Omar al-Jaffal, op.cit.} and the
decision could also be judged by the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court as unconstitutional, as only the
parliament is empowered with such prerogatives. Al-‘Abadi failed to create a consensus among
lawmakers on his first reform package, and on 2 November the parliament revoked any mandate
for the prime minister to conduct reforms prior to agreement with other political actors in the
On the other hand, this first reform package failed to satisfy popular demands for prosecuting corrupt senior officials, considered as a priority by demonstrators. Al-‘Abadi maintained Hassan al-Yasseri, a loyalist of his own Da‘wa party, as head of the Integrity Commission, in charge of bringing anti-corruption prosecutions. None of the investigation cases announced since August has targeted al-Da‘wa party members or other major political blocs. More generally, al-‘Abadi’s situation is critical as he must fight a political class with which he is himself associated and whose support will be granted only if reforms promise to change little.

The current Iraqi uprising has been considered a reformist and not a revolutionary one. Its main figures believe that a change within the regime and not a regime change (isqat al-nizam) is needed, and that al-‘Abadi could render this possible through a set of drastic measures empowered by a pro-reform coalition based on popular momentum, and the support of al-Sistani, the Sadrists, and the secular political forces. However, two questions remain crucial for the uprising’s fate. To what extent is the Iraqi regime reformable? And to what extent will the activists be able to transform this popular momentum into a coordinated central decision-making structure that could represent voices of dissent, sustain pressure, and produce change?

25 Kirk Sowell, op.cit.
26 Shaker al-Nasseri, op.cit.
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