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THE ROLE OF OPPOSITION PARTIES IN CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ POST-2019

Taif Alkhudary

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Changing the System from Within? The Role of Opposition Parties in Consolidating Democracy in Iraq Post-2019

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About the Author

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Abstract

This report examines the role that two of the most prominent opposition parties to have emerged out of the October 2019 protests – Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad – can play in consolidating democracy in Iraq. To this end, it draws on the work of Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand to assess both parties' degree of institutionalisation. It finds that they have developed strong identities based on unitary Iraqi nationalism and civic principles. However, it is also precisely because of this, that they continue to face a backlash from the sectarian post-2003 parties. Both parties also face substantial structural issues. They have been unable to develop common conventions of behaviour or ensure that conduct within their parties is carried out in accordance with democratic principles. The imbalanced nature of Iraq's party system has also opened up opposition parties to pressures of exclusion from establishment parties, which has sometimes led to violence. This has compromised opposition parties' decisional autonomy and their ability to develop reformist policies and programmes. Moreover, the political playing field remains deeply unfair with the dominant post-2003 parties' control of weapons and political money, along with the lack of legal protections offered to opposition parties, hindering their ability to compete effectively in elections.

Key Findings and Recommendations

This paper examines the role that two of the most prominent opposition parties to have emerged out of the October 2019 protests – Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad – can play in consolidating democracy in Iraq.

This paper finds:

- Both parties have developed strong identities based on unitary Iraqi nationalism and have faced constant backlash from the dominant post-2003 parties as a result.
- Both parties face substantial structural issues, both internally and externally.
- Internally, they have been unable to ensure that conduct within their parties is carried out in accordance with democratic principles. Both parties lack deep organisational capacity and instead have relied on charismatic leaders to drive them forward, suggesting that they are making some of the same mistakes as the dominant post-2003 parties. This poses a risk for their long-term survival and has increasingly led to their fragmentation.
- Externally, opposition parties have faced pressures of exclusion from establishment parties which has sometimes turned violent due to the fact that many dominant post-2003 parties have armed wings. Their emphasis on civic principles poses a threat to the dominance of the establishment parties and the post-2003 party system. This has worked to compromise the decisional autonomy of opposition parties and their ability to develop reformist policies and programmes.
- The political playing field in Iraq also remains deeply unfair, with the dominant post-2003 parties' control of weapons and political money, along with the lack of legal protections offered to opposition parties, hindering their ability to compete effectively with establishment parties.

In light of the abovementioned findings, this paper makes the following recommendations:

Democratic Processes

Any support to the country's opposition parties from the international community should take into consideration sensitivities around 'democracy promotion'. These initiatives must be carried out in a way that does not risk the security of opposition actors and based on ongoing conversations with them. The international community must also ensure that any interventions do not compromise opposition parties' decisional autonomy.

Democratic consolidation in Iraq also requires reforming the party system. In order to ensure that parties do not just serve the interests of a narrow set of ethnic or sectarian actors and promote national interests, the competitiveness of the party system needs to be increased. Regulations should be introduced that govern the formation, registration and behaviour of parties. For example, Article 11(1)(A) of the Political Parties Law should be amended to stipulate that a party needs to have branches and 2000 registered members in all of the country's provinces in order to register (Alhassan, 2021).

Efforts need to be made to increase the independence of the Independent High Electoral Commission's (IHEC) Party Affairs and Political Organisation. The IHEC should publish all its decisions and regulations and hold regular consultations with stakeholders (European Union Election Observation Mission in Iraq, 2021, 38).

The Political Parties Law should be amended to put limits on party spending during electoral campaigns and on in-kind donations (42). Clear sanctions should be put in place for any party that violates these rules. All financial records of parties should be submitted to and audited by the IHEC and made publicly available.

Steps should be taken to make party financing more equitable and transparent. The international community should use diplomatic channels to encourage the Iraqi government to implement Political Parties Law No. 36/2015. In particular, in order to implement Articles 42–44 on party financing, a committee should be created within the IHEC's Party Affairs and Political Organisation bureau to administer, oversee and report on the provision of public funds to parties.

Media

Measures should be put in place to encourage the development of independent media in Iraq. The government of Iraq must develop regulations for independent media and offer incentives, including subsidies and/or concessions to independent outlets that serve a broader public good (Al-Kaisy, 2019, 14). Steps should also be taken to increase the transparency of the financing and ownership of media outlets (6).

To level the playing field during elections, parties' access to media should be more equitable. The IHEC Mass Media Regulation Law No. 4/2020 should be amended to stipulate that there should be 'equitable' rather than 'fair' coverage of all candidates during elections campaigning.

Funding

The international community should include opposition parties in funding allocated to supporting capacity building of political parties. This funding should be assigned to local Iraqi organisations as much as possible, who already understand and are embedded within the political context in which the opposition parties operate. This money should also go towards long-term programmes and be based on local, rather than international, priorities.

Capacity building programmes should focus on issues including, but not limited to: developing party organisation, public administration, public speaking and other media training, policy development, training on relevant domestic and international law provisions and effective electoral campaigning.

Funding should also be allocated to grassroots organisations that emerged out of the October 2019 Protests and are engaging in programmes to educate the public on issues including elections, the importance of voting and civic principles.

A separate fund should be created and allocated to providing protection and security for independent candidates and opposition parties during election campaigns. A transparent application process should be put in place for those wishing to access this funding.

Introduction

In October 2019, the largest protests in Iraq's post-2003 history emerged in Baghdad and the central provinces, with over a million people repeatedly taking to the streets. Protests were initially triggered by lack of service provision, with demonstrators demanding employment opportunities, housing, clean water and electricity. However, following the deployment of systematic coercion across protests sites resulting in the death of some 500 protesters and injury of 25,000 others, demands evolved into calls for the overhaul of the entire political system, and at its heart, the consociational democracy installed in Iraq through foreign intervention (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Demonstrators argued that this system had allowed the parties installed following regime change to consistently evade accountability and only provided citizens with a procedural form of democracy (Alkhudary, 2023). Organised political opposition emerged during the protests in the form of opposition parties. Among the most significant of those groups, were Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad, formed in the aftermath of demonstrations in Dhi Qar, Southern Iraq.

In order to consider the role that Iraq's opposition parties can play in consolidating democracy, this report focuses on party institutionalisation in global south contexts through the work of Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand (2002b).[1] It is widely accepted that well institutionalised parties are more likely to endure and effectively combat internal and external threats (Randall and Svåsand, 2002b). What is more, by moderating and channelling grievances through the party system, well institutionalised parties can contribute to democratic stability and conflict management. Against this background, increased institutionalisation of Iraq's opposition parties would enhance the representativeness of the party system and increase the electorate's decision-making capacity by widening their choice of political leaders, as well as increase accountability by allowing for the creation of an effective opposition. It would also contribute to the creation of a more balanced party system and thus has the potential to encourage the dominant post-2003 parties to operate within the confines of democratic procedures.

In what follows, I will outline the paper's theoretical framework then briefly discuss the limited institutionalisation of Iraq's post-2003 party system and how this featured in the grievances that triggered the October Protests, as well as the emergence of Iraq's opposition parties. In the final section, I draw on semi-structured interviews with MPs, senior officials and members of Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad carried out between September 2021 and August 2022 to examine the degree of institutionalisation of Iraq's opposition parties.

[1] I define 'democratic consolidation' as 'a political regime in which democracy has become a given behaviourally, attitudinally and constitutionally'. Behaviourally means that major actors only use democratic means to obtain their goals, attitudinally implies that democratic process and institutions are considered by most people the only means through which to organise politics, and constitutionally means that all actors are subject to the laws and institutions of democratic processes. For more, see: (Randall and Svåsand, 'Introduction: The Contribution of Parties to Democracy and Democracy Consolidation', 2002a, 2).

Before beginning my analysis proper, first a caveat on democratisation in Iraq after 2003. Democracy promotion was one of the key premises under which the invasion of Iraq was justified by the US and UK once it became clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction. As David Beetham has powerfully argued, democratisation that comes about 'through invasion, or forcible democratization, is intrinsically flawed and self-contradictory' (2009, 446). This is because a key premise of democracy is that people should have self-determination, and this power to decide the course of one's affairs is automatically taken away when democracy is imposed from the outside and its parameters determined by the invading forces. It is for this reason that following the invasion of Iraq the notion of 'democracy promotion' was largely discredited both in Iraq and internationally (Carothers, 2006). Herein also lies the significance of Iraq's opposition parties. For the first time since 2003, they represent an indigenous movement that has sought to take back the reigns of what democracy means in Iraq and to refashion it in way that works to serve the interests of ordinary citizens.

Party Institutionalisation

Randall and Svåsand (2002b) have suggested that there are four components to competitive party system institutionalisation. This includes both internal and external, and structural and attitudinal elements (Figure 1).

The internal element refers to the relationship within parties themselves, and the external element refers to the relationship between the party system and other parts of the polity (7-8). The structural element means that in institutionalised party systems 'there is continuity among party alternatives' (7). This works to increase electoral accountability, as those parties that do not meet public expectations can be voted out. The attitudinal element refers to the extent to which parties perceive each other to be genuine competitors. This is important to ensure there is meaningful political opposition.

Figure 1: Randall's and Svåsand's Party System Institutionalisation Matrix

	Internal	External
Attitudinal	Relationship between parties	Public's trust in the party and attitudes toward the party system
Structural	Continuity among party alternatives	Sufficient degree of autonomy from the state and public measures

Randall and Svåsand have also developed an individual party institutionalisation matrix that can help to understand 'the process by which the party becomes established both in terms of integrated patterns of behaviour and attitudes and cultures' (12). They argue that broader party system institutionalisation can be compatible with individual party institutionalisation (8). Thus, for example, individual parties may benefit from public trust in parties as a whole, or from mutual acceptance amongst parties. They identify four specific

concepts that are common aspects of individual party institutionalisation in global south contexts. As with their party system institutionalisation matrix, this has internal, external, attitudinal and structural elements (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Randall's and Svåsand's Individual Party Institutionalisation Matrix

	Internal	External
Attitudinal	Value infusion	Reification
Structural	Systemness	Decisional autonomy

Value infusion refers to the success of a party in creating its own culture and value system, internally (13). Members will identify and are committed to the party beyond mere self-interest or instrumental reasons. According to Randall and Svåsand, value infusion is strongest when the political party is identified within a broader social movement, and has the ability to embed itself amongst affiliated organisations such as trade unions and cooperatives (21). This helps to incorporate the electorate into the movement, and supporters to identify with the party.

Reification, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the party's existence is established externally, in the public imagination (14). The more a party is taken for granted part of politics, the more likely it is that individuals, other parties and institutions will adjust their expectations and aspirations to accommodate it. Party reification depends on the 'extent to which parties become installed in the popular imaginary and as a factor shaping the behaviour of political actors' (23). It is dependent on the historic place and symbolic value that a party can effectively claim to represent, its access to effective means of communication and its ability to survive over long periods of time.

Systemness refers to the development of conventions of behaviour and their routinisation, or 'the increasing scope, density and regularity of the interactions that constitute the party as a structure' (13). The degree of a party's systemness depends on many factors such as: how the party originated and grew, its resources and funding, the role of the individual party leader versus the party organisation, the role of factions within the party versus the party as a whole, and clientelism (17). The role of the individual party leader, and more specifically charisma, plays a role in a party's formation and could even contribute to its cohesion and survival (18–19). However, this needs to be routinised so that the party does not become merely a vehicle for the fulfilment of the desires of an ambitious leader. Finally, 'decisional autonomy' refers to the extent of a particular party's freedom from interference in determining its policies and strategies (13–14).

Limits of Institutionalisation of the Post-2003 Party System

The consociational power-sharing party system of 2003 guaranteed communal leaders, affiliated with the seven major parties that would go on to dominate Iraqi politics after 2003, a place at the governance table (Dodge, 2018). Since 2005, these parties have developed an informal set of rules to divide the country's ministries, senior civil servants and the resources they control, between themselves in governments of 'national unity' (Dodge, 2020). This has led to endemic and politically sanctioned corruption, with President Barham Salih estimating in 2021 that $150 billion had been lost to corruption since 2003 (Dihmis, 2021).[2] To go back to Vandall and Svåsand's matrix on party system institutionalisation, this has meant that the public have little trust in both parties and the party system, with voter turnout rapidly declining from a high of 79.6 percent in 2005 to just 43.5 percent in the 2021 elections (International IDEA, 2022). What is more, rather than showing a sufficient degree of autonomy from the state, the dominant post-2003 parties have in fact captured the state and its institutions, routinely using public resources to fund party activities (Dodge and Mansour, 2021).

Mats Berdal, Philip Roeder and Donald Rothchild have argued that power-sharing only tends to promote peace in the short-term, while creating instability and obstacles to the consolidation of peace and democracy in the long-term (Berdal, 2009, Roeder and Rothchild, 2005). This is because power-sharing 'typically seeks to create a stable cartel among the elites of ethnic groups' (Roeder and Rothchild, 2005, 36). This means that power-sharing arrangements are not susceptible to change, as anyone who tries to join the system or transform it is kept out through repression on the part of the dominant elite (14). In this way, consociationalism limits the competitiveness of elections by allowing a variation of the same sectarian politicians and parties to stay in power. It circumvents one of the fundamental principles of democracy: the ability to hold leaders and parties to account for the choices they make while they are in office (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015).

Following the violence experienced by protesters in October 2019, the lack of a competitive party system became a key part of their grievances. Indeed, the protesters' paper, *Tuk Tuk*, argued that the same sectarian parties who had been empowered through international intervention and illegal occupation had entrenched themselves within the political system and came back time and again (Alkhudary, 2023). While according to Randall and Svåsand's matrix, stability in party alternatives is conducive of party system institutionalisation, protesters noted that in the Iraqi context what this in fact demonstrated is that the democracy installed after 2003 was procedural as opposed to substantive. They pointed out that Iraqis are given the opportunity to vote every four years, but this does not result in any real change in leadership or allow them any real choice over their representatives.

Protesters also felt excluded from the party system because the type of representation that the dominant parties offered them was only ever on the basis of sect or ethnicity. They argued that Iraq after 2003 had become a 'state of parties' and they wanted to trans-

[2] Some estimates have ranged even higher, see: (Jiyad, 2022) and (Mansour, 2022).

form it into a 'state of citizens', where there is a separation of religion and the state, and they are represented on the basis of their Iraqi citizenship as opposed to ethnicity or sect (Interviews, September 2021). The demonstrations and low voter turnout further attest to the lack of institutionalisation of Iraq's party system, as a significant portion of the population feel alienated from it and are not being represented by any party. Moreover, the ethnic-based nature of the parties means that the competitiveness of the system is limited as each party only ever appeals to voters within particular ethnic or sectarian communities and geographic areas in Iraq.

Emergence and Institutionalisation of Opposition Parties

By 2019, new political leaders had started to emerge, many of whom had been part of the Iraqi protest movement since at least 2011, taking up the mantra of the struggle in order to represent the once leaderless movement through the formation of civic parties. They sought to perform one of the key functions of political parties: to represent the interests of groups that had hitherto been unrepresented, and to change the political system from within. Against this backdrop, and galvanised by the announcement of early elections in October 2021, Dhi Qar saw the emergence of Al Bayt Al Watani led by Hussein al-Ghorabi, a long-term activist and lawyer whose father is the representative of the Marjaʿi in the province, and Imtidad led by Alaa al-Rikabi, a pharmacist by trade, who rose to prominence during the 2019 protests through posting videos on social media.

In the rest of the paper, I will draw on Randall and Svåsand's party institutionalisation matrix to assess the extent of Al Bayt Al Watani's and Imtidad's institutionalisation.

Attitudinal Components

When developing their identities, Iraq's new opposition parties relied heavily on the notion of unitary Iraqi nationalism. Senior members of Imtidad stressed that the identity underpinning the work of the party was 'loyalty to Iraq not ethno-sectarian apportionment' (Interviews, May 2022). Similarly, in documents outlining Al Bayt Al Watani's internal working procedures, the party is described as: 'a liberal democratic organisation that believes in freedoms, justice and equality as important values, and the Iraqi nation as an identity and framework that unites all citizens according to the concept of citizenship which the party counts as a single identifier among Iraqis'. Both parties have been successful in presenting themselves as representatives of a historic tidal change in Iraqi politics by mobilising the symbolism of the October protests. In this way, the new opposition parties are attempting to channel protesters' demands through the party system by making the idea of the Iraqi nation the vehicle through which constituents are represented. As part of this, they have developed a set of values specific to their parties, as a means of increasing value infusion and their recognition by the electorate.

Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad have tried to implement the principles of the 'state of citizens' through ensuring that their membership and alliances are not ethnicity- or sect-

based. Al Bayt Al Watani have not only established party branches in Shiʿa majority areas of the South, but also in mixed and Sunni majority areas of Northwest Iraq.[3] While Imtidad's offices are limited to Baghdad and the southern provinces, they have also sought to challenge the sectarianism on which positions are distributed within Iraq's party system and coalitions are forged.[4] After initially winning nine seats following the October 2021 elections, they formed the 'For the People' alliance with New Generation, a party from Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG).[5] Together, they vowed to stay out of government and the customary division of public resources between the dominant post-2003 parties. Instead, their strategy consisted of forming an opposition bloc that would hold the government to account for its actions, and to remain in the opposition until they won enough seats to be able to take over the reins of government (Interviews, May 2021 & August 2022). The importance of the values being espoused by both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad lies in the fact that democratic consolidation does not only require familiarity with democratic procedures, but more importantly it requires the promotion of civic values including a willingness to trust in fellow citizens (Burnell and Randall, 2008, 266). Against this background, Iraq's new opposition parties have sought to restore a sense of civic duty, creating parties that do not simply work to fulfil their own interests but also those of their fellow citizens. In this way, they also have the potential to restore trust in the party system and political parties as a whole. Furthermore, through establishing branches nationally or creating cross-ethnic coalitions, they have sought to increase inter-party competition.

Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad have also had success in incorporating affiliated organisations into their movement, which Randall and Svåsand argue is important for strengthening value infusion. For example, in September 2022 the first in a series of meetings was organised in Nasiriyah bringing together 40 entities, including opposition parties that boycotted elections, civil society, trade unions and independent figures. These meetings were an attempt to create a civic alliance calling for democratic reforms (Sot Al Iraq, 2022). Following the meeting, three committees were created to formulate a common political vision, to envisage the type of electoral system that could bring about change and to draw up an alternative social contract (Al Ghorabi, 2022). This will prove significant when organising during elections, mounting voter turnout campaigns and electoral monitoring, as well as mobilising protesters when necessary.

Despite these efforts, cooperation between opposition parties has been limited overall. In the run up to the October 2021 elections, targeted assassinations carried out by militias saw at least 30 political activists assassinated and resulted in a split between those parties that wanted to participate in the elections and those boycotting (Alkhudary, 2021). These splits were heightened by the fact that a number of new parties emerged claiming to represent protesters but were in fact affiliated with the dominant post-2003 parties.[6] Within

[3] Al Bayt Al Watani has branches in the following areas: Basra, Salah Al Din, Mosul, Muthana, Babel, two offices in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, Diyala, Diwanya and Dhi Qar.

[4] Imtidad has offices in Baghdad, Babel, Wasit, Najaf, Karbala, Diwanya, Samawah, Dhi Qar and Basra.

[5] Following the resignation of Sadrist MPs in June 2022, a further seven candidates who ran with Imtidad during the elections won seats (Iraqi News Agency, 2022).

[6] A prominent example of this is the Waʿie Movement which claimed to have emerged out of the October Protests but was in fact affiliated with Ammar al-Hakim.

this context, Iraq's opposition parties have found it difficult to ascertain who they can trust. This sense of distrust has since spilt over into the parliament, where many independent MPs have refused to form alliances with Imtidad out of fear that this will lead to the loss of their electorate, or that one party may pursue its interests at the expense of the other.

The reification of Iraq's opposition parties is also limited. Imtidad's party ideology is relatively underdeveloped, instead they articulate who they are as a party through their programmes (Interview, August 2022). They do not mention an ideology in documents outlining the internal workings of their party, and instead describe the aims and principles of the party as, 'creating a state of citizens and institutions … advancing the economic situation … providing services and giving youth a real role in building the country and make sovereignty and a decent life a reality'. The lack of strong ideology underpinning the party's work is also evident from several interviews conducted with members of Imtidad, who noted that people voted for them during the October 2021 elections in protest against the dominant post-2003 parties (Interviews, May & August 2022). In relation to Randall's and Svåsand's reification criteria, this goes some way to show that the party is not well established in the public's imagination given that people voted for them based on who they are not as opposed to who they are.[7] In addition, it suggests that the electorate's relationship to the party is instrumental in so far as they voted for them on the basis of the programmes they promised to provide, as opposed a broader ideology that they represent.

The weakness in the reification of Iraq's opposition parties is also evident from the resistance Imtidad has faced from the dominant ethno-sectarian post-2003 parliamentary parties when presenting themselves as a civic party. As an interviewee explained, 51% of all seats on parliamentary committees are reserved for Shiʿa parties, with 30% for Sunnis, 18% for Kurds and 1% for minorities (Interview, August 2022). Within this context, when 'For the People Alliance' attempted to present itself as a fifth civic force, members of the dominant parties told them they would only be given seats on those committees if they agreed to adhere to the division of seats on ethno-sectarian grounds (Interview, August 2022). Since then, during the swearing-in session of the new Prime Minister Mohammed Shiaʿ al-Sudani, al-Rikabi was assaulted while holding up images of slain protesters and calling for those responsible to be held to account (Al Jazeera, 2022). Consequently, Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi unilaterally decided to ban al-Rikabi and fellow Imtidad MP Falah al-Hilali from parliament for five sessions. In January 2023, al-Hilali, along with a number of other opposition MPs, were also voted out from various important parliamentary committees by the Shiʿa Coordination Framework (SCF), who argued for the need for a second vote as a result of the withdrawal of the Sadrists from parliament (Salam, 2023). However, opposition MPs argue their removal was because these positions allowed them to obtain sensitive information, including about parliamentary corruption that the dominant post-2003 parties did not want them to access. Thus, rather than being an accepted part of the Iraqi political landscape, opposition parties face pushbacks at every turn.

[7] It is also important to point out here that even in well-established democracies with institutionalised parties, sometimes votes for candidates can be opposition votes.

Structural Components

In regard to the structural components of party institutionalisation proposed by Randall and Svåsand, the experiences of Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad attest to the difficulties of maintaining decisional autonomy when the dominant post-2003 parties have captured the state. This was made apparent by the decision taken by seven out of nine of Imtidad's MPs who voted for al-Halbousi as speaker of parliament (Salim, 2022). Imtidad has claimed that they were threatened into voting for al-Halbousi, as they were warned that they would not be called up to speak in parliament if they did not do so (Interview, May 2022). On another occasion, when Imtidad developed a policy stipulating that the Popular Mobilisation Front (PMF) should not be affiliated with any party and that all commanders should be graduates of Iraqi military colleges, they were attacked online and members of the party received threats (Interview, August 2022). Members of both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad have also been subjected to physical violence. After announcing her nomination, former Imtidad MP Nissan al-Salhy received threats warning her not to run in elections (Abdelhameed, 2022, 10). After winning a seat in parliament, her home in Dhi Qar was targeted with a homemade device by unidentified gunmen (Al Shafaq News, 2022). Similarly, a member of Al Bayt Al Watani suggested that the party's decision to boycott elections was taken in part because at least 10 of their candidates could not go back to the districts where they wanted to run for parliament because of threats from militias, who blew up the house of the party's General Secretary Hussein al-Ghorabi (Interview, March 2022). Within this context, it is difficult for either Al Bayt Al Watani or Imtidad to have any real decisional autonomy whether in relation to running in elections, choosing who to vote for, and even their own policies; the use of violence and threats means that the playing field remains skewed in favour of the dominant post-2003 parties.

Ellen Lust and David Walder have argued that 'the willingness of a given party to create and sustain democratic institutions may be powerfully conditioned by its capacity to mobilise support relative to other types of parties' (2016, 176). The cost of one party tolerating another is highest when opposition parties present 'projects of societal transformation that are antithetical to rival parties or champion communal interests that sharply conflict with communal interests represented by other parties' (176). Democratisation is most threatened when there is a mix of really weak parties and powerful established parties. In other words, when parties' capacities to mobilise support, create organisational hierarchy and develop programmes remains highly uneven. In such a system, certain parties' perception of their relative strength compared to other parties, limits their willingness to be bound by democratic rules and to reach solutions through negotiation and compromise (177). In Iraq, the dominant post-2003 parties have consolidated their power through capturing the state, and through their control of weapons and political money, which opposition parties cannot access. Therefore, when the latter posed a threat to the post-2003 party system and the place of established parties within it, the dominant parties turned to violence, as opposed to democratic tools, to keep them out of politics. In other words, the imbalance of the party system has opened up opposition parties to pressures of exclusion from establishment parties and given that Iraqi politics suffer from endemic violence, these pressures have sometimes turned violent.

The vote for al-Halbousi as speaker of parliament also resulted in the resignation of 17 prominent members of Imtidad. Such splits also appear to be commonplace in local branches, with both members of Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad interviewed for this paper complaining that one of the biggest issues they face is how to transform their membership, mostly made up of activists, into politicians willing to negotiate and sit down with established parties and political leaders. This suggests a lack of routinisation of behaviours due, at least in part, to the fact that both parties are in their infancy and were hastily formed in the run up to elections.

While on the one hand Imtidad promised to stay out of the ethno-sectarian division of resources, they also voted for one of its key proponents. As one member of the party explained, this was partly because the party's MPs were inexperienced and partook in the vote less than three months after entering parliament (Interview, May 2022). This is problematic, because the kind of factionalism taking place in both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad can lead to their fragmentation and mean that they won't endure in the long-term, something which, as discussed in the attitudinal analyses, is crucial for party reification.

Randall and Svåsand also place emphasis on the relationship between leadership and party organisation as a means of determining systemness. Arguably in both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad, personal leadership is much stronger than organisation. Imtidad's General Secretary – Alaa al-Rikabi – was accused of taking decisions without consulting other members of the party, leading to the resignation of five out of nine of the party's MPs (Baghdad Today News, 2022). Subsequently, al-Rikabi's position was frozen for six months until the party's annual conference would be held, and a decision taken as to whether to reinstate him as General Secretary. However, al-Rikabi reinstated himself just two months later with no apparent explanation as to the basis on which this decision was taken (Earth News, 2022). Similarly, al-Ghorabi was suspended from the party after being accused of corruption following his advocacy for Mohammed al-Hadi – who ran as an independent MP with the Sadrists during the 2018 elections – to become governor of Dhi Qar (Interview, May 2022). As a consequence, he was also suspended from the party after an investigation undertaken by an internal party committee found that some allegations against him were justified (Interview, May 2022). In turn, there were mass resignations in the party with entire local branches disbanding (Iraq News Network, 2022). However, throughout his suspension, al-Ghorabi continued to represent the party in public forums. These examples demonstrate that rather than having deep organisational capacity, both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad are led by charismatic leaders who have used the parties as vehicles to pursue their own interests, making the same mistakes as establishment parties. What is more, it attests to the lack of routinisation of conventions of behaviour. While both parties have procedures in place if it is found that their internal working procedures are violated, the two General Secretaries reinstated themselves as heads of their respective parties despite their suspensions. In turn, this suggests that the heads of both parties are themselves not habituated to democratic norms, and as such their ability to install such rules of conduct within the party cadres is limited.

In relation to access to resources as determining systemness, both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad used donations from supporters to establish their parties, freeing them from political money on which dominant post-2003 parties rely (al-Jaffal, 2021). While both parties receive membership dues, the funds they can raise in this way are limited as both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad only have 2500 registered members (Interviews, August and September 2022). This is compounded by the fact that while the majority of the party's leadership have middle class occupations, the constituents they represent are predominantly from working class backgrounds who cannot afford to pay membership fees. Furthermore, the lack of funding also worked to limit the kind of electoral campaigning that Imtidad could carry out in the run up to the October 2021 elections. For example, they spent just $2,700 on their campaign in Dhi Qar where they initially won five seats (The Arab Weekly, 2021). In addition, they engaged in door-to-door canvassing and held local meetings (Interview, July 2022). However, they struggled to move candidates around electoral districts due to lack of transportation funds, and could not afford to put in place adequate security provisions for the candidates who feared being attacked while on the road.

While Articles 42 to 44 of the Political Parties Law No. 36/2015 provides for direct funding of parties, subsidies are not currently given out as the law is not implemented, making it difficult for Iraq's opposition parties to pay for requirements necessary for effective electoral competition (European Union Election Observation Mission in Iraq, 2021, 16). This is particularly the case because, despite being outlawed under the Political Parties Law and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) Campaign Regulation Law No.5/2020, state resources are routinely used by the dominant parties for their campaigns (15). There is no accountability for such infringement, as while parties are supposed to submit finance reports to IHEC, due to the fact that members of this body are often affiliated with the dominant post-2003 parties who appoint them on the basis of ethno-sectarian quotas, these reports are virtually never scrutinised or made public (16). The only consequence for the violation of financial regulations currently in place is the non-payment of subsidies and this is rendered void by the fact that these subsidies are already not paid out by the state.

For Randall and Svåsand, systemness is also dependent on effective access to media. In Iraq, there are two main laws which codify political parties' access to the media. The Political Parties Law stipulates that all parties should have access to the media in order present their views, and the IHEC Mass Media Regulation No.4/2020, requires that the media covers candidates 'fairly' – a vague criteria that is not in line with international standards (18). In addition to limited legal protections, the vast majority of Iraqi media outlets are partisan and are usually owned by politicians belonging to one of the dominant post-2003 parties.[8] Consequently, the European Union Election Observation Mission (2021) found

[8] For example, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazali, owns Al Ahad TV; Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masrour Barzani, owns Kurdistan 24 and the head of the Hikma Party, Ammar al-Hakim, owns Al Furat News.

that coverage given to each political party was not equitable during the October 2021 elections. Party members interviewed for this paper also said that their lack of media training meant that it was difficult to take control of the narrative around their parties (Interviews, May & August 2022). In relation to social media, which proved more important than traditional media during the October 2021 elections, Imtidad were again limited by their lack of access to funding. For instance, a candidate who ran in Muthana said that they only had a budget of $50 to spend on paid advertising on Facebook, the most used social media platform in Iraq (Interview, July 2022). The fact that the party is relatively new meant that it did not have the kind of social media infrastructure and following that established parties had. This again attests to the limits of competition within Iraq's party system, as access to the media is not only preserved for those who own media outlets, but the legal protections necessary to be able to engage in effective electoral campaigning are also lacking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad have achieved a limited degree of institutionalisation in the relatively short period of their existence. While they have been able to develop good value infusion, their degree of reification, systemness and decisional autonomy remains weak.

In relation to value infusion, both parties have drawn on the symbolism of the October protests to present themselves as civic forces calling for unitary Iraqi nationalism and have built alliances with civil society. However, their connections to other opposition parties remain limited due to their politicised and partisan nature and the distrust that this has created. Reification remains weak, with opposition parties' presence in the political arena still questioned by both the dominant post-2003 parties and the public. This can be attributed to the fact that they pose a substantial threat to the long-term viability of the established Islamist parties and party system. It also attests to the difficulties of operating within a deeply sectarian system as a civic force.

Al Bayt Al Watani and Imtidad also face substantial structural issues both internally and externally. For this reason, their degree of systemness remains limited with both parties struggling to develop common conventions of behaviour or to ensure that party activities are conducted in accordance with democratic principles. They lack deep organisational capacity and instead have relied on charismatic leaders to carry them forward. This has opened them up to becoming vehicles for ambitious politicians to pursue their interests, leading to their fragmentation and posing a risk to their longevity. Furthermore, Iraq's imbalanced party system has left opposition parties vulnerable to attempts to exclude them by establishment parties, which has sometimes resulted in violence. This has compromised their decisional autonomy and their ability to develop policies and programmes that challenge the dominant post-2003 parties. Moreover, the political playing field remains deeply unfair with establishment parties' control of weapons, political money and the media, along with the lack of legal protections offered to opposition parties preventing them from competing effectively during elections.

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About PeaceRep

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University. PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform

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Cover Image
Protesters take part in an anti-government demonstration near Baghdad's Tahrir Square, 1 November 2019.
Source: Ameer Al Mohammedawi/dpa/Alamy Live News

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