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# SUPPRESSING DISSENT IN POST-TISHREEN IRAQ

Iraq Watch Group

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# Suppressing Dissent in Post-Tishreen Iraq

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## About the Author

Iraq Watch Group is a group of researchers and analysts focusing on Iraq.

## Abstract

While legal tools and repressive tactics have been used by Iraq's political elite to suppress dissent since 2003, these tactics were extended and systematised following the 2019 protests. In particular, it is shown that vague provisions in Iraq's outdated legal framework have been instrumentalised to silence criticism of the state's political elite. This has been supported by the country's security apparatuses and through recourse to ideological discourse. Ad hoc methods for restricting accountability mechanisms have also been pursued as a means of limiting checks and balances. This represents a move away from the use of overt and visible violence to more covert forms of coercion, aimed at improving the political elites' public image whilst also undermining grassroots activism and preventing the occurrence of mass uprisings in the future.



## Key Findings

- The October 2019 protests marked a critical juncture in post-regime change Iraq, highlighting widespread public discontent with the existing political system. The demonstrations were initially met with considerably brutal violence by the government. However, the ruling elite's approach has evolved into a more nuanced strategy aimed at pre-emptively silencing opposition through a blend of legal, security and ideological measures, as well as tactics to limit accountability mechanisms.
- Central to this strategy is the instrumental use of legal mechanisms and the judiciary to silence opposition. The Iraqi judiciary, increasingly aligned with political elites, has exploited broad and ambiguous legal statutes to target and penalise dissenting voices.
- Legislative changes and policy measures have also been used to suppress freedom of speech. Proposed legislation and policies threaten to further narrow civic space in Iraq, indicating a deliberate effort to legally expand the government's ability to silence opposition and dominate the production of political and societal discourse, curtailing open debate and dissent.
- The enforcement role played by security institutions, including the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), underpins the state's repressive tactics. Instances of arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial arrests, and coercive intimidation campaigns against critics underscore the weakness of the rule of law and the security apparatus's complicity in this wider strategy of oppression.
- Government strategies that manipulate legal ambiguities to cast activists as threats to social order or national security have deterred their engagement in the public sphere. These tactics suppress dissent and marginalise and delegitimise reform advocates, solidifying governmental dominance over the societal discourse.
- Domestic and international entities must hold the Iraqi government to account. The transition from overt violence to more covert forms of suppression pose grave threats to democratic principles, human rights, and legal integrity. Accountability and protecting fundamental rights are imperative steps towards rebuilding confidence in the political system and fostering a genuine dialogue on Iraq's path forward.

## Introduction

In a correspondence that took place in February 2024, Abdullatif Rasheed, the President of Iraq, and Jassim Mohammed Abed, the head of the Federal Supreme Court, deliberated over the repercussions of a WhatsApp group discussion, which they suggested was derogatory towards the state. This dialogue between the two senior officials underscored concerns that these platforms could disrupt public order, compromise communal security, and undermine institutional stability as they claimed that such groups' intention to 'evaluat[e] government entities' performance' was an attempt at blackmail (UltraIraq 2024). This exchange highlights the government's stance – from the president, the judiciary and downward – on regulating speech, which it is claimed will preserve societal harmony.

During that exchange, the Federal Supreme Court referenced Article 38 of the Iraqi Constitution, emphasising the state's commitment to safeguarding freedom of expression, provided it does not contravene public order or morals. It was proposed that infractions of this principle could lead to punishments of up to seven years in prison, as stipulated by Article 226 of Iraq's penal code.<sup>1</sup> Following this exchange, the Communication and Media Commission (CMC) in Iraq acted upon the president's concerns, issuing a directive that barred analyst Yahya al-Kubaisi, one of the members of the WhatsApp group, from participating in any media-related activities (Al-Mada 2024). This is particularly relevant because this group, like others in Iraq, is an elite discussion circle, comprising politicians, analysts, and journalists. Such groups are central to Iraq's civil space and suppressing them directly curtails freedom of expression.

In this paper, it is argued that while legal tools and repressive tactics have been used by Iraq's political elite to suppress dissent since 2003, these tactics were extended and systematised following the 2019 protests. In particular, it is shown that vague provisions in Iraq's outdated legal framework have been instrumentalised to silence criticism of the state's political elite. This has been supported by the country's security apparatuses and through recourse to ideological discourse. Ad hoc methods for restricting accountability mechanisms have also been pursued as a means of limiting checks and balances. This represents a move away from the use of overt and visible violence to more covert forms of coercion, aimed at improving the political elites' public image whilst also undermining grassroots activism and preventing the occurrence of mass uprisings in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 226 states that 'Any person who publicly insults the National Assembly or the government or the courts or the armed forces or any other constitutional body or the public authorities or official or semi-official agencies or departments is punishable by a term of imprisonment not exceeding 7 years or detention or a fine.'

## Methodology

This report draws on data collected from 25 semi-structured, anonymised key informant interviews carried out by the authors from September 2023 to February 2024. Interviewees include a diverse group of stakeholders: members of parliament, security officials, activists, representatives from the Shiite Coordination Framework, as well as civil society members and journalists. These interviews have been supplemented with open-source data, encompassing an analysis of legislation, news reports, and documented cases illustrating the government's utilisation of legal and security mechanisms to suppress dissenting voices.

## A Shock to the System

The Iraqi political system faced immense pressure during the October 2019 protests, where millions of Iraqis in central and southern Iraq protested for months against the corruption of the political system. Ultimately forcing the ruling elite to make major concessions to the demonstrators. This included Grand Ayatollah Sistani successfully calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government, which was ultimately responsible for the killing of about 800 protesters during the demonstrations, and the adoption of a new electoral system (International Crisis Group 2021), which boosted the electoral chances of independent candidates and those not affiliated with major parties.

When early elections were called in 2021, the results were contrary to the interests of the political class, especially the Shi'a factions, who traditionally controlled the Prime Minister position and major ministries, including the Ministry of Interior. The traditional Shi'a parties – later forming what is now known as the Shiite Coordination Framework (SCF) – saw a decline in their voter numbers, as a result of widespread voter apathy and due to voter mobilisation against the dominant political parties, primarily targeting parties associated with armed actors. The SCF consists of the dominant Shi'a political parties with the exception of the Sadrists, who left the political process post 2021 elections due to their inability to form a government.

The Shi'a parties of the SCF saw their votes dip to such an extent during the 2021 elections that the Fatah Alliance lost 69.49% of its total vote count, compared to the 2018 elections, in the central and southern cities of Iraq. Meanwhile, the State of Law Coalition's vote share went down by 25.24%, and the Forces of the State (Hikma and Nasr Alliance) plummeted by 76.07% (Iraqi Higher Electoral Commission 2021).

In addition to political and electoral achievements, the protest movement succeeded in garnering widespread social sympathy, especially among youth. In a 2020 Chatham House survey about protesters' demands, 83% of Iraqi respondents indicated that they believed either all or most demands were justified. Additionally, former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi stated 'The Tishreen protests shook the system and around 70% of the Iraqi population were supporting the protests' (al-Abadi 2023). This included families of the politicians themselves, as per the testimony of a senior member of a party within the



Coordination Framework: ‘Back in 2019, my daughter called me late at night and told me that you need to respond to the demands of the protesters, or else I will run far away from you. When I speak with other officials, a considerable number tell me that their kids participated in the protests or exerted similar pressures on them.’

The shock induced by the protests was compounded by the political system’s lack of appropriate tools to deal with large-scale protests across Iraq’s Shi’a areas. While smaller-scale protests occurred in Baghdad and Basra in 2011, 2015, and 2018, as well as in Sunni areas like Anbar, Salahaddin, and Nainawa from 2011 to 2013, the October 2019 protests represented a significant turning point. These protests, centred in Shi’a strongholds, saw the Shi’a population taking to the streets against the status quo parties. In essence, it was a revolt of Shi’a citizens against their own leaders.

## Countering the Shock of Tishreen

Iraq’s political elite and, in particular, the SCF, are now attempting to develop a strategy primarily focused on addressing the threat of potential future protests and preventing any new protest movement. This strategy is designed to stymie the threat of protests by acting pre-emptively, rather than relying on the overt violence that was utilised in the 2019 protests, where hundreds were killed and tens of thousands injured in public view. The strategy includes suppressing public opinion and fostering a discourse hostile to humanitarian values, democracy, and freedom of expression. Additionally, it involves demonising various international community actors, while entrenching a system capable of legally evading accountability. This phenomenon is not unique to Iraq. There is literature suggesting that governments across the world use authoritarian institutions and legislature to enhance leaders’ capacity to reduce their reliance on physical repression (Rivera 2017).

A senior advisor associated with the SCF confirmed this strategy, emphasising to the authors, ‘Ideally, Iraq will be like Egypt, where the state and security apparatus have more control over society. As we navigate the initial phases of democracy, it is imperative to solidify state authority to maintain stability and enhance service delivery.’ He further remarked, ‘There are adversaries who are opposed to Iraq’s prosperity, and it is crucial to limit their efforts to sustain this stability.’

Although building these tools is primarily aimed at dealing with future protests, it also hollows out democratic aspects of the system including civil liberties, transparency and accountability. Since 2017, Iraq’s ranking in the democracy index has been slowly decreasing, reaching its lowest point ever in 2023 when it ranked 128 out of 167 countries and was described as an ‘authoritarian regime’. Prior to 2017, Iraq’s score had been gradually on the rise (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023). Freedom House has cited the weakness of formal institutions and corruption in Iraq as reasons for its ranking as ‘not free’, scoring 30 out of 100. In Freedom House’s ranking Iraq received 16 out of 40 for political rights and 14 out of 60 for civil liberties (Freedom House 2024).

## The Development and Use of Repression After 2003

Iraq's post-2003 political elite used authoritarian institutions and legislature to quash political dissent since regime change, partly because the rule of law has historically been weak and constitutional guarantees insufficient to uphold democracy. However, these tactics were initially used only sporadically and have been used more systematically since 2019. The use of legal tools to suppress dissent and quash opposition is a recurring theme in Iraq's recent history, underscored by the continued application of certain legal instruments, such as the penal code created during the time of Ba'ath party regime, and which is now being used by political elite such as the SCF.

For example, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki employed Article 4 of the anti-terrorism law against Sunni protesters calling for his resignation. The article provides 'the death penalty for anyone who incites, plans, finances, or assists terrorists to commit the crimes stated in this law.' Thus, instead of overt coercion, Maliki used legislation to quash anti-government protests (Ruhayem 2013). In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the authorities frequently arrest critical voices – such as journalists and activists – en masse (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Mohammed al-Halbousi, the former speaker of the Iraqi parliament, on the other hand, leveraged local law enforcement and judicial systems to pursue critics with arrest warrants (Foltyn 2023). An arrest warrant was also issued against analyst Yahya al-Kubaisi, for instance, after he criticised Halbousi. Later, al-Halbousi himself was eventually ousted from his position in parliament through similar legal manoeuvring, showcasing the cyclical and pervasive nature of these repressive tactics across Iraq's political landscape (Al-Mada 2021). Similarly, during Mustafa al-Kadhimi's term as Prime Minister, similar methods of repression were evident (Al-Hassani 2021), with the judiciary actively issuing arrest warrants against critics.

## The Systematisation of Repressive Tactics Post-Tishreen

### 1) Legal Tactics

#### Iraq's Legal Framework

Iraq's existing legal framework, largely a remnant from the Ba'ath regime era, sufficiently enables the silencing of dissent. This has been utilised by the judiciary, which has been increasingly aligned with the SCF, as a means of sidelining political adversaries through legal rulings and interpretations that favour the SCF's interests. One of the SCF leaders, Hadi al-Ameri has stated in an interview that 'We [the political elite] threaten the judiciary [...] we pressure the judiciary to neglect corruption cases' (Alhurra Iraq 2015).

This alignment has been evident in recent actions against those criticising the political elite, judiciary, or affiliates. High-profile cases include former judge Rahim al-Akili, journalist Sarmad al-Taie, and activist Ismail Musabeh al-Waeli, all of whom faced arrest,

imprisonment, or were compelled to flee the country due to threats from armed groups and judicial directives because of their public comments about the central role of the judiciary in the current direction that the political system is taking.

The judiciary in Iraq, like other state institutions, is susceptible to elite capture and hence can be immune to accountability (Mansour 2023). This capture has enabled it to target critics under the guise of Article 226 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which penalises ‘insulting the authorities’ with up to seven years in prison. The broad and vague definitions within this article and related articles (227, 225, and 229) allow for their application in a manner that can criminalise dissent against the system or its leaders.

A legal expert mentioned that ‘Iraq’s penal code is outdated, and it does not fit a democratic system. Many articles in that law can be utilised against journalists, critics or anyone they do not like.’ The suppression of dissent in Iraq appears to extend beyond well-known journalists and activists, affecting ordinary citizens who voice their criticisms of the judiciary, even in private settings. A senior civil servant noted: ‘In our province, a 19-year-old criticised the judiciary privately among friends. He was arrested and taken to an undisclosed location. We have learned of 13 similar arrests across Iraq where citizens have been arrested on the basis of criticising the judiciary, but their families are too frightened to discuss the matter, and we are unable to contact the detainees.’

This pattern of targeting extends to individuals associated with political groups as well, as highlighted by a Sadrist activist. He recounted the arrest and alleged torture of an administrator of Sadrist social media accounts, who was detained for criticising the judiciary. ‘He was tortured at Muthanna Airport prison... one of Iraq’s worst prisons, where he was beaten from 7 am until 8 pm.’ This incident, tied to an arrest warrant issued by the judiciary under article 226 for the former Sadrist MP Ghaib al-Amiri (Rudaw 2022) over a fabricated social media post (Tech4Peace 2022).

### Introduction of New Restrictive Laws

The political elite have made no serious efforts to reform existing Ba’athist era laws; instead, they continue to propose additional legislation that threatens to further restrict freedom of expression. Among the notable proposals before parliament are the Cybercrimes Law, the Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly Law, the Right for Access to Information Law and laws penalising criticism of religious symbols and authorities. These proposals mimic the vagueness and potential for abuse characteristic of Ba’ath-era statutes, posing a risk of arbitrary enforcement to curb speech (Amnesty International 2023).

These laws introduce prohibitive measures that try to interpret the Iraqi Constitution’s guarantees, particularly Article 38, which safeguards citizens’ right to protest (Iraqi Constitution 2005) mainly by linking constitutional paragraphs into a new understanding of morals, which considers criticising the government as something unethical. The proposed regulations within the Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly Law require

protestors to navigate a labyrinth of security and administrative approvals, effectively criminalising those who fail to comply. ‘This proposed law aims to entangle legitimate protests in administrative red tape, thwarting public dissent by embedding it within the governmental bureaucracy,’ one legal expert stated, highlighting the systematic efforts to demobilise civic engagement.

Additionally, while the Cybercrimes Law initially sought to address legitimate online offences, its scope has been broadened by political interests to encompass restrictions on digital expression. An independent MP lamented the legislative process’s susceptibility to manipulation, stating, ‘Proposing new laws within this environment is ineffective; they are consistently twisted to suppress freedom of speech the moment they reach parliament.’ Other legislative proposals, including a draft law on the right to access information, could potentially restrict information availability even further, criminalising the publication of information without navigating through intricate bureaucratic approvals (Al-Talqani 2024). Additionally, activists have raised alarms about forthcoming legislation being deliberated in parliament that aims to criminalise any criticism of religious entities, without clearly defining what constitutes these entities (Alarab 2023).

#### Alternative Methods of Restricting Freedoms

Despite significant public opposition from civil society organisations and human rights defenders that have repeatedly stalled the enactment of controversial proposed laws such as the cybercrime law, authorities have sought alternative methods to restrict freedom of expression without parliamentary approval. A notable attempt was the introduction of the ‘Content Regulation Policy’ by the Communications and Media Commission (CMC), which wields extensive control over all media content in Iraq (Access Now 2023). This policy, spanning over 30 pages, introduces prohibitions on ‘insulting the authorities’, ‘insulting the state’, ‘targeting the democratic system’, ‘endangering national unity’, and ‘violating public order’, among other ambiguously phrased offences, effectively laying the groundwork to censor a wide range of expressions (Communications and Media Commission 2023).

Iraqi authorities have also reactivated Article 403 of the penal code, which penalises ‘indecent content’, posing a threat to social media influencers with potential jail time of up to two years for actions considered as ‘violating public morals’. The ambiguity of terms such as ‘the authorities’ and ‘public morals’ within these articles presents a significant challenge. This lack of precise definitions permits those in power to interpret the law broadly, effectively suppressing public discourse. After a period of being dormant after 2003, the revival of this law’s use post-2019 represents a shift towards the use of legal mechanisms as tools for a more insidious form of control, compared to previous strategies of direct physical repression.

## 2) Coercive Tactics

Security forces in Iraq, including the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), frequently carry out judicial orders or execute their own directives for investigations, interrogations, and arrests. Recent reports also indicate the involvement of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) in certain arrests, showcasing a broader utilisation of the security apparatus in enforcing legal actions. While security sector institutions in Iraq have long been part of the ethnosectarian powersharing system and utilised by the political elite, their use to suppress freedom of expression has been on the rise as evident from the cases below.

The MoI has been engaged in various capacities to enforce existing judicial orders or initiate actions independently as part of their operational duties. A notable case involved Ali al-Dabhawi, who was detained by the MoI and held at the Salhiya police station for three days without an official warrant (Faris 2024). Similar operations with official warrants have been conducted against individuals like analyst Mohammed Na'ana', known for his critical views of PM Sudani and his administration. Na'ana' has faced multiple arrests, highlighting a pattern of using security forces to target government critics (Al-Kubaisi 2024).

As for the PMF, the judiciary has extended arrest, investigation, and interrogation powers to them, despite such powers traditionally falling under the purview of the MoI (Alhurra 2022). This authorisation has led to the persecution and, in some cases, torture and killing of activists critical of the armed groups. An analyst with ties to the SCF has stated, 'the PMF are legally entitled to arrest and conduct investigations as they possess their own designated judges and an intelligence unit. These activities are both legal and constitutional.'

Practical implementation of this alleged legality is the case of Iqbal Douhan, a tribal figure in Diwaniyah, southern Iraq. PMF's Security detained Douhan, and he subsequently died from torture (Alarab 2022). His arrest was justified by allegations of his ties to the Ba'ath party and purported plans to disrupt the Arbaeen pilgrimage. Contrary to these accusations, medical sources confirmed that Douhan had been bedridden for over a year due to severe health issues, casting doubt on the charges and highlighting the misuse of judicial powers to silence dissent.

Contrarily, other analysts challenge this view, asserting that the PMF law does not grant such powers and that judges affiliated with the PMF are meant to address internal matters within the PMF only, suggesting a misinterpretation or overextension of the PMF's legal authority (Iraqi Official Gazette 2017).

Recent shifts within the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) further complicate the landscape of legal and extra-legal detentions, as those changes favoured individuals closer to the SCF (Skynews Arabia 2022). This reorganisation has seemingly emboldened the

INIS to detain individuals without proper judicial warrants, as highlighted by a senior security official. A case in point is the arrest of anti-corruption blogger Yasser al-Juboori for five days in February 2024 at Baghdad Airport by the INIS as he attempted to leave Iraq (UltraIraq 2024). Al-Juboori was detained without a warrant and held before being transferred to a police station for investigation and trial. His family later revealed that the Prime Minister's Office had accused him of insulting authorities under Article 226 of the Iraqi Penal Code, he was released after a few days in detention after public pressure from Iraqi activists and the international community.

### 3) Ideological Tactics

The authorities strategically frame legal enforcement and political narratives as efforts to allegedly defend 'societal morals' and protect 'family unity'. This approach is employed to justify the repression of dissent and criticism. Political parties frequently cite legal provisions, such as Articles 226 and 403 of the penal code, presenting themselves as guardians of societal values, purportedly shielding the community from the decline of social norms and the weakening of family bonds.

By demonising the West and associating the October protest movements with foreign interests, activists who were involved with it or even liberal and reformist ideas with negative societal impacts, these narratives aim to consolidate a public perception that views any form of dissent or demand for reform as a threat to the moral and social fabric of Iraqi society. This strategy not only diverts attention from the state's failures in fulfilling its basic duties but also legitimises the repression of civic freedoms under the guise of protecting societal morals, thereby stifling democratic discourse and pursuing substantive reforms.

For example, the campaign against the concept of 'gender' in Iraq represents a strategic manipulation of social and cultural apprehensions to restrict freedoms and rights, mainly targeting women and civil society organisations (Amnesty International 2023). By conflating gender rights with homosexuality – a subject that elicits significant societal apprehension – the campaign has effectively justified various forms of repression, including the deprivation of political rights for women and the prevention of laws that would protect them, such as the domestic violence law. An activist shared with the authors her experiences of being targeted, stating, 'I was threatened multiple times just because I have pictures at workshops funded by international organisations. They are spreading misinformation about our work and claim that we [former Tishreen activists] want to spread homosexuality across Iraq.'

The events of 7 October 2023 exacerbated an already challenging environment for those advocating for change and reform. Activists who have been defamed by the political elite as 'Western agents' have also been accused, by virtue of their supposed association with the West, of being linked with Israel. This move is calculated to exploit the Iraqi public's anger against the Israeli genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and to channel these sentiments into retaliatory actions against progressive activists in Iraq. The case of Zainab Salbi, a feminist activist, is illustrative. Salbi was accused of having suspicious relationships with

international intelligence agencies, with these allegations being circulated through various social media outlets ran by Iran-backed groups (Embassy Boys 2023).

This strategy also extends its impact to civil society organisations, which have been pivotal in supporting protest movements and advocating for human rights and gender equality. The Ministry of Higher Education's decision to bar these organisations from accessing Iraqi universities – particularly those organisations like the Iraqi Al-Amal Association, known for supporting protests – underscores the use of policy to stifle civic engagement and suppress dissenting voices (Saad 2024). The requirement for organisation leaders to sign pledges against working with international entities that support 'gender initiatives' further illustrates the targeted efforts to limit civil society's influence and activities.

These strategies are employed with several objectives in mind by those in power. Firstly, they seek to isolate and vilify activists by exploiting entrenched regional hostilities and political sensitivities, thereby swaying public sentiment against them. Secondly, by portraying activists as agents of foreign conspiracies, state authorities or affiliated entities can rationalise the imposition of repressive actions as measures of national security. This approach not only muffles opposition voices but also deters others from voicing their concerns, fostering an atmosphere of intimidation and suppression.

#### **4) Restricting Accountability Mechanisms**

The political elite have also aimed to inhibit the operations of the independent Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR). A former commissioner disclosed to the report authors that 'both the government and the parliament refused to push for the renewal of the commissioners' mandates, and the government have forcefully reduced our budget as a way to limit our work.' Moreover, the initiation of an investigation against former commissioner Ali al-Bayati for comments made during a television appearance further exemplifies the use of judicial measures to intimidate and silence advocates for transparency and accountability in human rights matters (MENA Rights Group 2022).

Iraqi authorities have taken measures to restrict access to specific websites that frequently critique government officials or expose corruption, including *UltraIraq*, known for its investigative journalism (Press Freedom Advocacy Association in Iraq 2023). The government has also blocked the Arabic satire website *al-Hudood*, without explaining its reasons (INSM for Digital Rights 2024). These actions indicate a concerted effort by the Iraqi government to control the narrative and limit public access to information that may challenge the official stance or reveal government misconduct.

Additionally, the political elite have taken measures to limit opposition in parliament. This is particularly clear from the targeting of independent MPs like Sajjad Salem, Alaa Al-Rikabi, and Falah Al-Hilali, who were physically attacked, barred from parliament and had legal complaints filed against them. In particular, it indicates effort to stifle opposition as a means for the political elite to maintain control over the legislative process, as well as to weaken the parliament's system of checks and balances.

## Conclusion

The Tishreen protests have led the political elite in Iraq to reconfigure their strategies of control, transitioning from blatant acts of violence to subtler, yet equally coercive, legal tactics. This paper identifies a consistent pattern of actions against activists, journalists, and dissenters, employing a mix of outdated laws, proposed repressive legislation, and arbitrary regulatory actions designed to quash opposition and preserve the existing power dynamics. Such tactics not only erode the foundations of democratic governance but also signal a dangerous drift towards authoritarianism.

Moreover, the government's attempts to sway public sentiment against reform advocates, by branding them as agents of foreign powers or threats to moral standards, represent a calculated effort to discredit and marginalise voices calling for change. This effort is further amplified by the deliberate shaping of political discourse in the parliament, which effectively silences authentic opposition and undermines the democratic values of accountability and transparency.



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Anti-government protesters stage a sit-in while security forces stand guard during ongoing protests in downtown Baghdad, 19 January 2020  
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