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Generational Shifts and Informal Consociationalism in Iraq

by Kamaran Palani



Iraq's former speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi at a parliamentary session in Baghdad, Iraq, 26 March 2023. Source: mediaofspeaker/Twitter

In Iraq, one of the most persistent modes of governance since 2003 has been the application of consociationalism – a form of power-sharing that guarantees the inclusion of major ethnic, sectarian, or political groups in key decision-making **processes**. While this arrangement is not formally codified in the 2005 constitution, it has become entrenched in Iraqi political **culture**. Following the fall of the former regime, an informal yet longstanding practice emerged: the prime minister's position is reserved for a member of the Shia community, the speaker of parliament for a

Sunni Arab, and the presidency for a Kurd. This pattern has survived successive government formations and reshuffles for over two decades.

However, the Iraq of today differs markedly from that of 2003. More than half the population is now under the age of 25, meaning a significant proportion of Iraqis were born into a political system already shaped by ethno-sectarian divisions. Public sentiment has evolved accordingly. Whereas early post-2003 grievances often centred on communal **divisions**, popular anger is now directed at elites and the political class more broadly. This shift raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of the power-sharing system in the country. Do citizens – particularly younger generations – still support such an arrangement? And what does this mean for the country's political future?

Generational Change and Political Attitudes

Against this backdrop, **this research project** has set out to explore the relationship between generational change and the persistence of consociational power-sharing in Iraq, focusing on citizens' perspectives and generational shifts. It also sheds light on how demographic changes shape the sustainability of power-sharing systems beyond the Iraqi context.

Methodologically, the project employs a mixed-methods approach. Between July and August 2024, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Baghdad and Erbil, along with 12 in-depth, in-person interviews. The FGDs involved 21 participants who provided a diverse range of perspectives, and an online survey administered between October and November engaged 1,020 respondents from varied backgrounds across Iraq. These combined methods illuminate how younger and older Iraqis understand power-sharing and how their identities and priorities have shifted over time.

Identity Politics in Transition

Iraq's informal consociationalism rests on ethno-sectarian foundations: Arab versus Kurd, and within the Arab population, Shia versus Sunni. Yet the relevance of these identities to contemporary politics has evolved. Protests in 2019–2020, widely interpreted as non-**sectarian**, led scholars to debate the ongoing utility of identity politics as a lens for understanding Iraqi **affairs**. While some argue that identity-based frameworks, though **muted**, still underpin political **processes**, others contend that politics in Iraq has moved beyond simple sectarian **rivalries**. Instead, internal elite competition and other factors now shape the political landscape more profoundly than the once-dominant Sunni-Shia or Arab-Kurd dichotomies.

Despite evolving trends towards power-sharing arrangements, Iraq's political elite continue to rely on identity as the cornerstone of their system's stability and the basis of their authority.

Simultaneously, different communities hold varying perceptions of their own identities. Among Arab

respondents in the survey conducted for this project, 'family' and 'religion' emerged as key elements of self-definition. In contrast, Kurds and other ethnic minorities placed greater emphasis on 'ethnicity.' The pronounced focus on ethnicity among Kurds, compared to Arabs, indicates that certain forms of identity remain influential even as broader ethno-sectarian frameworks lose some of their explanatory power.

When comparing Sunni Arab and Shia Arab respondents, both groups prioritise family and religion, but diverge in other areas. Sunni Arabs tend to emphasise ethnicity more than Shia Arabs, while Shia Arabs place relatively more importance on sect. These subtle distinctions highlight the complexity of identity in Iraq today. Political elites may seek to preserve their power through identity-based arrangements, but the salience and meaning of these identities continue to evolve.

The survey findings also reveal a significant divergence in attitudes towards 'Iraqi national identity', particularly among Kurdish respondents. While general respondents expressed high levels of pride in their Iraqi identity, Kurdish participants fell into the 'Detractor' category, with 78% scoring low on the pride scale (0–10). This contrasts with the relatively small proportions of 'Passive' (11%) and 'Promoter' (11%) respondents. The qualitative data and survey findings reveal an intriguing dynamic: participants who expressed greater pride in their Iraqi national identity were less likely to support the power-sharing principles and practices.

Declining Support for Consociational Power-Sharing

Preliminary findings suggest that support for Iraq's consociational power-sharing arrangements is waning, especially among younger citizens. When asked if the current system reflects the country's diversity, a majority (58%) deemed it 'outdated and unrepresentative,' 29% saw it as 'somewhat representative but could be improved,' and only 4% found it 'fully representative.' Another 9% were unsure. These responses reflect widespread dissatisfaction and raise questions about the system's ability to address Iraq's diverse needs and demographic changes.

While some groups – particularly Kurds and other minorities – still view principles of power-sharing, such as proportional representation as a safeguard against exclusion, many Iraqis doubt that it truly serves the public interest. Younger respondents, in particular, express frustration that fixed power allocations have led to gridlock, corruption, and ineffective governance.

Public sentiment is also shifting towards majority-based governance, with more Shia and Sunni Arabs favouring electoral competition over guaranteed shares of power. Meanwhile, Kurds and smaller minority groups – though still inclined to support fixed power-sharing arrangements (known as corporate consociation in academic terms) due to fears of marginalisation and demographic changes – are less enthusiastic than before. Many now share the view that current power-sharing structures benefit political elites rather than truly representing their communities.

The Future Sustainability of Power-Sharing in Iraq

While discontent with ethno-sectarian power-sharing is on the rise, entrenched interests in the political class continue to bolster these arrangements. Indeed, decisions by the Iraqi Supreme Court, such as the 2022 ruling that effectively requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority to elect the **president**, reinforce the necessity of broad coalitions and indirectly uphold consociational practices.

A pivotal question for ongoing and future literature on consociationalism and power-sharing in Iraq is whether shifting attitudes among ordinary citizens will prompt a restructuring of the governance system, or whether political elites will adapt – or resist – these demographic and societal changes. Will the current power-sharing framework endure, or will it evolve to accommodate the changing dynamics? This academic project delves deeply into these issues, contributing insights to the broader power-sharing literature while assessing the sustainability of Iraq's existing arrangements.

About the author



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