"The biggest problem we face is keeping our independence"[1]

Party Oppressions of Civil Society in the 'new' Iraq

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July 2009

Civil society is an indispensable tenet of democratisation. Its weakness in the post-totalitarian context is predominantly understood to derive from a regressive inheritance of ethnic nationalism, civic distrust in voluntary organisations and ideological tension with an illiberal state and illiberal non-state groups. This paper argues that while powerful these explanations are, the more enduring oppressions are those a nascent and inexperienced civil society cannot easily recognise. Perceived as innocuous, they are unlikely to be confronted. A 'return to the past' of state dominance in the civil sphere becomes ever-likely. This argument is illustrated through open-ended interviews with the Directors of 24 local civil society organisations across Iraq. The findings suggest that the overt symptoms of post-totalitarian transitions described are well recognised by a civil society that has mobilised against them. By contrast there is greater ambiguity over the creeping in of political parties through their affiliated secular and faith-based organisations. Since 2004, these have more intensively undermined civil society's independence from the state by exploiting its hazy demarcation with the state left over from its post-totalitarian past. What autonomous liberal civil society remains is charged with confronting both the overt threats described *and* these veiled party organisations. This dual challenge limits its potential to promote good governance and push back the state, threatening the future quality of democracy in Iraq.

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[1] Director of a Baghdad based non-governmental organisation.

Introduction

In the media shadows of departing British troops, and the withdrawal of American forces from its cities, Iraq's grassroots civic associations are tirelessly working to keep the country on a path to democracy. Through developing their capacity and guarding their autonomy they may guide the country's political, economic and social upheavals in liberal directions. While bolstered by 2008's military operations in the south and the wider legitimacy they conferred on Al-Maliki's political authority, the fragility of security gains was made abundantly clear with August's devastating strike on Baghdad. In this setting, positive peace and an enduring democracy increasingly depend on the state's willingness to support a robust and pluralistic civil society. Given these testing times, now is as opportune a moment as ever to consider the long-term viability of a flourishing civil society.

If other post-totalitarian transitions are any indicator, the prospects of such a civil society in Iraq are not promising.[2] Illustrated by its slow and piece-meal success in Eastern Europe, post-totalitarianism presents a plethora of challenges that undermine civil society's democratising potential. These, by and large, comprise civic distrust in voluntary organisations and the wider political sphere, the dual tasks of ideologically combating both illiberal actors and an illiberal state, and some would claim an inheritance of 'ethnic hatreds' (Howard 2002, Kostovicova 2006, Huntington 1996, Kaplan 1994). They are well-recognised obstructions to change, and frequently documented by academics and civic actors alike. In Iraq they are all too apparent. Violent sectarian and factional power struggles, jihadist and nationalist attacks and profound public distrust after years of Ba'arth party rule have unfolded in the context of sweeping ideological questions on the state, religion and foreign intervention in the Middle East.

Despite Iraq's civic associations having recognised and mobilised against these oppressive forces, their progress in advancing remains weak. This suggests there are other, less visible inhibitory processes at work. This paper attempts to probe how violence transforms as democracy develops and how other perhaps more enduring oppressions may be acting in concert with a regressive post-totalitarian heritage. Furthermore given the nascence and inexperience of Iraq's liberal civil actors, it is important to

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[2] Linz and Stepan provide the most definitive explanation of post-totalitarianism (Linz and Stepan 1996, 42-51). This political system is characterised by limited but not responsible social, economic and institutional pluralism perhaps informing a 'parallel culture', relative de-ideologisation, routine and disillusioned mobilisation of populations and party cadres of careerists and opportunists and an uncharismatic leadership drawn from the political elite and party technocrats.

contemplate the extent to which they are aware of this shift and the qualities they must guard to confront it. Elusive as these questions may be, this author found much insight in discussions with local residents. The findings, interspersed throughout, are taken from open question interviews with the Directors or Founders of 24 local civil society organisations operating across Iraq.[3]

Outline and Argument

The paper begins by presenting contemporary theories on the weaknesses of post-totalitarian civil societies before applying these to Iraq. Contrary to the dominant narrative, it demonstrates how the development of civil society there since 2003 has endured, if not overcome, major obstacles of its post-totalitarian heritage. Yet it also reveals how in response to the gradual de-legitimisation of violence, political parties have sought novel ways of projecting their authority. It explores how through the vehicle of socio-political faith-based organisations and party-affiliated non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they are undermining civil societys pluralism, tolerance, independence and autonomy. It goes on to discuss why liberal civil society, unfamiliar with the gravity of these democratic tenets, is failing to oppose such party infiltration. It concludes that civil society is tasked with both confronting its post-totalitarian heritage *and* these veiled party oppressions. This dual challenge profoundly weakens its potential to promote good governance and push back the state, threatening the future quality of democracy in Iraq.

Definitions

While the 'civil society argument' is a discourse of not entirely congruent arguments, dominant definitions draw on notions of flourishing, pluralistic and autonomous civic associations (Walzer in Foley and Edwards 1996, 1). This is illustrated by one of its more influential definitions as an, "arena of the polity where self-organising groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state,

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[3] Participants were selected from a sample of 61 organisations based on their geographical spread and the nature of their activities. While participating organisations had headquarters in Arbil (3), Dahuk (2), Salah Ad Din (1), Baghdad (5), Diyala (1), Al Qadisiyah (2), Karbala (1), Wasit (1), Babil (1), Ninawa (1), Dhi Qar (2), An Najaf (1), Maysan (1), Al Basrah (2), 63% reported having projects in more than one province. Interviews ranged in length from 35mins to 3hrs and 20mins with a mean length of approximately 1hr 20mins. The focus of activities encompassed democracy promotion, election monitoring, women's rights and education, youth empowerment, constitutional awareness and political participation, disabled rights and care, legal issues and transparency initiatives, freedom of media, sanitation projects, humanitarian assistance, NGO coordination efforts, unemployment rights, free medical services, arts and culture exhibitions, refugee and IDP assistance and community conflict resolution. Transcripts can be obtained from the author by emailing Juliet.kerr@gmail.com

attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests." (Linz and Stepan 1996, 7). This normatively neutral definition can encompass a milieu of 'civil' and 'uncivil' actors and so is apt for any analysis on its oppressions. Equally the definition both distinguishes civil from political society (which comprises political parties, interparty alliances and legislatures, political leadership etc.), and recognises the autonomy and independence of each (Diamond 1994). The ability of any fledgling civil society to push back the state and protect these qualities then may provide some guage of its strength and long-term prospects. While this paper will not evaluate the numerous positions on civil society (a topic tackled extensively elsewhere)[4], it does challenge those that claim its existence in Iraq, like other Middle Eastern countries, can only be a myth, an oversold enterprise, or simply a Western construct (Tempest 1997, Hawthorne 2005). It supports the universality of democratic values and sees organisations of civil society as real entities able to contribute in important ways to democratic transition[5] if only their contextual and operational difficulties are better understood (Howell and Pearce 2001, Ibrahim 2006).

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[4] The most comprehensive account including its historical rise can be found in Arato and Cohen (1994); see also Foley and Edwards (1996); and for an analysis focused on post-communist civil society see Skapska (1997).

[5] While the validity of the democratic transition paradigm has itself been questioned (Carothers 2002) this paper supports the view it is an applicable and relevant theory (Nodia 2002).

Veiled Oppressions and Enduring Weakness

The liberalising elements of any civil society are widely credited as a tour de force in both democratic and post-conflict transitions. This followed from the oft-cited third wave of democratisations of the mid-1970s to early 1990s, and informed a body of literature championing local ownership and participation for enduring democracies and positive peace (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005). Civil society became romanticised as "a vehicle for asserting the autonomy of those who wanted to act 'as if they were free'' (Linz and Stepan 1996, 7). "The decade-long struggle of Solidarity in Poland, the environmental protests of the Danube Circle in Hungary, or even short-lived demonstrations in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, all had shown the 'power' of civil society" (Kopecký and Mudde 2003, 1). Soon international institutions, notably the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, were espousing 'good governance' and attaching citizen empowerment as a tenet of their assistance programs. [6]

Optimism was somewhat deflated then when civil societies, and notably those in post-totalitarian transition, proved weakly able to advance democratisation. Worldwide these began to decline, to the extent that of the 123 underway only **"**67 gave rise to democratic regimes that survived through 2004" (Kapstein and Converse 2008). In his critique of the democratic transition paradigm itself, Carothers points to the particular failure of civil societies to progress democracy in Central Europe and the Baltic region (Carothers 2002). Strikingly in the Western Balkans too, setbacks continued to unfold in Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia despite massive political, economic, social-welfare and administrative support, carrots in the form of EU ascension and in the latter cases, contentious international administrations. [7]

Theories abounded to explain this trend but broadly speaking it seemed liberal civil society was structurally weakened by both oppressions from without and within. Civil societies in post-conflict contexts confronted direct violence and anarchy but those in post-totalitarianism transitions also faced the sensitisation of supposed ancient ethnic cleavages and an ideological contest over the future quality

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[6] 'Good governance' is generally defined as transparency, accountability and citizen empowerment (Kapstein and Converse 2008, 60).

[7] The current state of affairs is comprehensively analysed in a recent report of the European Security and Defence Assembly, *ESDP and the Future of the Western Balkans* (2009).

and character of the state between its power holders and civil society (Huntington 1996, Kaplan 1994, Horowitz in Byman 2003, 53, Kostovicova 2006). Compounding this was Howard's structural observations of their weak participation in organisations, a consequence of former lives invaded by state-controlled organisations that repressed any autonomous pluralism. Any possibility of overcoming this would be hindered by a pre-occupation with deep and vibrant private friendship networks in the context of broad disillusionment with the post-totalitarian reality. By eschewing such participation citizens were failing to develop democratic habits and skills (Howard, 2002).

By oppressions from within, theorists referred to civil society's own illiberal actors that sought to make it dull and acquiescent (Chandhoke 1995, 162). Closer analysis revealed that rather than being a sphere that was wholly 'good', liberal streams of civil society fostering social cooperation interacted, confronted, and even coalesced with illiberal or uncivil society fomenting social conflict (Posner 2004, Kopecký and Mudde 2003). In the process civil society's capacity to act and promote good governance was further weakened.

Applying this to the case of Iraq, we should expect to see civil society succumbing to a combination of these external and internal discursive forces. However the following section shows this has not been the case.

Iraq's Post-Saddam Civil Society

With the fall of the Ba'ath party, Iraq's independent civil society brimmed to the surface. Like post-totalitarian societies in Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s, it spent the regime's waning years exploring the growing fissures in the state's repressive apparatus (Said, 2005, Linz and Stepan 1996). Since 2003, despite a surge of uncivil forces, liberal civic associations have evolved into two overlapping and interacting blocs of what are considered here as local and international civil society.

The local bloc comprises homegrown, independent organisations established, present and active in Iraq from the outset. Having endured the vicissitudes of violence, managing to remain operational in many cases, they rest on profound local ties and respect. In the process they have developed salient identities as 'genuine' NGOs and take great pride in their experiences and determination during this founding period. Given their centrality in conflict resolution at the grass-roots level, and the need to empower

such groups[8], it is some irony that their future is often financially insecure. Their branches and offices are exclusively in Iraq. Staff are fairly inexperienced in the language and procedures of international aid mechanisms and project proposals, limiting their ability to secure funding.[9] They are highly dependent on voluntary participation and local donations, the former proving difficult to some organisations who reported Iraqis were unfamiliar with volunteerism. So while originally constituting the bulk of civil society activity, local tier organisations find themselves increasingly overshadowed by the return of their international peers.

This latter group comprises Iraq's international civil society. They are largely humanitarian and democracy promotion in purpose and employ local staff, or subcontract work out to local organisations. They include groups set up by internationally connected Iraqi Diaspora which despite having branches in Iraq enjoy little local connection. As either members of Iraq's exiled opposition, or having been displaced over time by the country's three conflicts, they have developed strong ties outside the country, particularly in Amman where regional UN agencies concentrate, and in the policy and academic circles of Western Europe and North America. While fewer in number to the local bloc, their international recommendations afford them greater access to Baghdad's International Zone. Here they benefit from greater exposure to international donors and information on legislative developments. This gives them greater potential to shape Government policy. Better placed to receive funding, their long term prospects are far rosier than their local tier counterparts. While they fled the intense violence of 2005-2007, improving security has encouraged their return and expanded their reach beyond the more acquiescent sites of the International Zone and northern cities such as Arbil. In sum, through these two blocs Iraq has established a liberal civil society.

Their existence and proliferation, suggest the oppressions flowing from anarchy and a post-totalitarian past have been to a signifcant extent resisted. Often at great personal sacrifice its composite groups have effectively promoted their ideals through resting on supportive familial networks, inter-organisational cooperation and a sheer determination to carry on. Contrary to the 'ethnic hatreds', argument they were not undone by illiberal actors instrumentalising the religious, ethnic and communal cleavages of contemporary conflicts (Kaldor 2007). Indeed it was against this line, and the insurgent

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[8] A detailed account of fostering civil society engagement in conflict is given by Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2005).

[9] Carapico describes the 'class dimensions of criteria for qualifying for international loans, grants, or programs – such as preferences for those who speak English, understand spreadsheets, or dress in appropriate business attire' (Carapico 2000, 14).

groups promoting it, that they constructed inclusive identities, calling on Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Christians and Muslims to remember their long shared past. The regressive inheritance of 'public distrust' too proved surmountable. Liberal NGOs described at length the time and energy they invested in encouraging participation by educating Iraqis on their purpose and voluntary nature. Their success in encouraging political engagement, notably through democracy and electoral education is reflected in the success of the January elections. Their local influence is reflected in their numbers and projects that continue to grow despite the state's repressive licensing procedures and interviewee's reports of the unexplained suspension of application processing (Elbayar 2005, 12).[10] These successes though have been overshadowed in the West by the 'surge' narrative and the media attention on organisations of the international bloc whose relative absence during the height of the insurgency suggested all liberal actors had been incapacitated by criminal gangs, paramilitary wings and religious militias. Thus the oppressions of Iraq's post-totalitarian society that dominate the literature, while extraordinary, appear to have been well recognised by those civil organisations interviewed. This meant they could be confronted. However this is not to say Iraq's civil society has rid itself of the chronic weaknesses its Eastern European peers could not.

The Rise of Party Politics in Civil Society

With the dawning reality that violence would not remain an acceptable route to power, Iraq's competing political authorities began seeking the legitimising effect of liberal civility. They, like the average Iraqi, had noted the local success of liberal civic organisations in nurturing social ties. These had got to work first providing basic humanitarian needs in the yawning social service vacuum.[11] A mix of small secular and faith-based organisations, they began re-establishing societal bonds profoundly weakened by a milieu of external, overt threats: a) the post-totalitarian inheritance of societal distrust of the political arena described, b) decades of identity politics, state patrimonialism and rent-seeking (Tripp 2007), and c) insurgent tactics of indiscriminate violence (Kalyvas 2004). An account from the

[10] This is a common reaction of Arab states (particularly Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Tunisia) that reflects a deep-seated suspicion of the work of NGOs (Carapico 2000, Pitner 2000, Kubba 2000, Wiktorowicz 2001).

[11] Contrary to accepted knowledge, the Office of the Martyr Sadr did not take the lead in filling the vacuum created by massive erosion of state power between 2003 and 2008. On the contrary any humanitarian connotations of its work were rejected in places such as Sadr City in Baghdad due to the indiscriminate violence it employed often within its own community base.

Director of an NGO in Diwaniyah was typical, political parties began to "feel their (local NGOs) effects on the community and so they felt that they needed also to form these organisations as well, in order to have a greater effect on society". One clear example followed the spring 2008 counter-insurgency operations in Basrah and surrounding areas. These saw Government-led Security Forces make significant gains in eroding support for the Sadrist Party's rather diffuse paramilitary wing, the Mahdi Army. Soon after, party leader and fire-brand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr announced Mahdi Army operations would, like Lebanon's Hezbollah, hence forth be 'humanitarian'. In the minds of out-gunned political leaders then, a 'hearts and minds' approach could provide an alternative route to power.

Secular and religious parties alike began constructing a 'grey area' of their affiliated faith-based organisations and disingeniously named 'NGO's.[12] Funded by parties and frequently run by party members, these would forge a robust link between political and civil society. They adeptly veiled their political intentions in either the devotional and familiar narrative of religion, or the langauge of democracy promotion with projects on election monitoring and constitutional awareness etc. While the roots of some lie in the Ba'arth party era, their proliferation since 2004 has been so intensive and extensive that 83% of interviewees were familiar with their work. Notable examples include the al-Da'wah Party's 'Martyr Fartima Al-Hussaini Organisation', the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's affiliations with the 'Congress for Free Youth', 'Congress for Islamic Youth', 'Congress for the Muslim Women', and 'Al-Mihrab Martyr Foundation' (whose Director is the son of its leadership Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim), and the Communist Party's 'Tamouse organisation'.

Their reach also extended to Iraq's local bloc of independent NGOs. More and more this struggling group traded its autonomy to political parties for basic funding. In return, organisations guaranteed both to advertise a party's work, and the votes of their members and service users at the polls.[13] A Director in central Iraq was explicit,

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[12] 71% of Directors interviewed described how faith-based organisations and co-opted NGOs would disingenuously call themselves 'non-governmental'. One Director in Dhi Qar lamented what he called their propaganda, 'non-governmental organizations are not there for profit, but these organizations are for profit to gain support for the parties they are associated to'.

[13] As the Director of a Baghdad based organization puts it, "they are supported financially by the parties that back them. So when they hold these events, or conduct these projects in turn they (the parties) get the support of the public for their particular party".

"I was offered financing from political parties on condition that the 150 members of the society vote for a particular political bloc…it happened three times in 2005 and three times in 2006 and each time it was three different political entities in 2005 and three different political entities in 2006".

Another Director of an organisation in Maysan, Baghdad and Diyala, described how,

"they (local tier NGOs) would get funding from certain international organisations or countries back in 2004. After that they wouldn't get funding from these organisations a second or third time so what would happen is that they would gradually transform themselves into an organisation that is affiliated to particular parties in order to get funding from these particular parties".

Additional funding from sympathetic religious communities improved the funding prospects of faith-based organisations well beyond their civil society peers. As such they are likely to remain a permanent feature in Iraq's political landscape. The communal loyalties of faith-based organisations in general makes them more able to raise funds locally and less dependent on state aid (World Bank research in Clarke 2008, 12). Nonetheless parties can also assist them by manipulating Iraq's opaque budget allocations process as illustrated in an email received by a Najaf-based organisation in April 2008.

"It was saying that the parliament has distributed, given local NGOs money, lots of money in Najaf, to two NGOs. But the only people who had any of the money that was given out were the NGOs that had very high contacts in the government or belonged to a political party…in Najaf, they took all the projects and everything because they were part of this political party and they had these political views, it (the recipient faith-based organisations) has places in Kerbala, Baghdad and has taken around $90,000".

Over time it would seem civil society has found party-affiliated organisations working in its midst. At least in Iraq, particular organisations may directly or indirectly encourage this state intrusion. Aside from the rather general group of struggling groups that just need the money, faith-based organisations perhaps present a unique vehicle capable of bringing the state back in. On a theoretical level, the various opinions of this genre of organisations simultaneously place them in liberal, illiberal, civil and political society. Thus to understand whether they mobilise or manipulate the masses demands a closer analysis of their role and purpose.

Socio-Political Faith Based Organisations: Bringing the State Back In

Faith-based organisations are not a new phenomenon however, their growth and clout has been rising particularly since the 1980s in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, a trend thought to reflect the continued growth of historic religions like Christianity and Islam (Gifford in Hebert 2003, 4). Their popularity in Iraq and the broader region though is considered a product of multiple factors. While beyond the scope of this paper, theories include a reaction to either the fast or slow-paced nature of modernisation, an educated middle-class resentment towards authoritarian governments, anaemic economic growth, and spiralling youth unemployment amid a perceived humiliation of the *ummah* (the community of Muslims) by Western powers that has revived a pan-Arab and pan-Islamic social movement (Ayubi 1991, Abed 1995, Barber 1996, Bruce 2000, Kubba 2000, Tessler 2002, Hebert 2003, Alterman 2003). In weak Arab states and to some extent Iraq, they have substantially filled the developmental and social service vacuum. In Somalia they constitute the primary welfare provider in the absence of an effective state (Clarke 2008, 27). In Egypt, some 20% of the 12,832 registered voluntary organisations in 1997 were faith-based organisations (Clark 2004, 12), while in the Gaza strip and West Bank, they made up 10-20% of all social institutions in 2000, figures that have undoubtedly climbed since (Roy 2000, 25).

The faith-based discourse on their democratising nature though is rather uncompromising. One side highlights the quality and extent of their social services and developmental initiatives that engage poor communities and underpin poverty reduction initiatives. Clark champions how faith-based organisations advance their faith unobtrusively regardless of whether this is Islam, Christianity or Judaism, while Clarke argues their work is critical in uniting disparate ethnic groups (Clarke 2008, Clark 2004). Through promoting religion, faith-based organisations "provide ethical and moral guideposts to individuals as they take responsibility for their lives" (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004, 23). They cite the undeniably crucial support of Hezbollah and Hamas in supporting the desperately neglected needs of populations in Southern Lebanon and Gaza respectively. The popularity of their sophisticated administrative, health care, education and banking welfare organs, massive reconstruction endeavours, reinforced by religious *fatwas* and the perceived integrity of their work has become entwined with their political development (Hamzeh 1993, Roy 2000, Harb 2008).

On the other side, faith-based organisations are seen as diametrically opposed to democracy. Even organisations openly supporting it are met with suspicion (Kramer 1997). Considered little more than instruments to control the masses, it is argued they do not "encourage or foster autonomous popular

organisation or action, but treat the masses as objects of religious reform and control" (Zubaida 1997, 62). Through valourising poverty, evident in classical writings on the topic, they instill in societies a "culture of silence – the sort of culture that socialises people into passivity or submissiveness" (Barakat 1993, 135). This, so it is claimed, explains their dominance in authoritarian Arab states, and why it is highly erroneous to champion faith-based organisations as civil society organisations given the vast majority's inability to hold the state to account. Indeed, while Orientalists see their rise there as an Islamic phenomenon, critiques of faith-based organisations note how in states across the Middle East it is simply much easier to be an NGO than form a political opposition (Carapico 2000, 13). In this light, social welfare projects become merely a method by which loyalties are bound, a thesis implicit in Wiktorowicz research on the work of Egypt's long-standing Muslim Brotherhood where "beneficiaries provide political support to the Brotherhood because of its social service provision" (Wiktorowicz 2001:108).

Both these positions it seems are deeply influenced by our contemporary understandings of religion and civil society. Those against faith-based organisations implicitly accept theories claiming Islam and democracy are incompatible. Briefly this argues that Islam and the popular attitudes, beliefs and traditions it informed, are and always will be inimical to democratic political culture (Huntington 1996, Gellner in Sadowski 1997, 42). This Orientalist perspective confines itself to a static view of Islam predicated upon the writings of Muslim traditionalists, notably Sayyid Qutb and al-Mawdudi who believed the nation-state was a direct contradiction of Islamic religious and political thought as it rested on the authority of human rather than divine legislation.[14] Yet given that God's will would ultimately be interpreted and applied by man himself, Orientalists argued any objective understanding of right and wrong would always be skewed in favour of the 'common good', a vision fought over by the religion's dominant sects (i.e. Sunni and Shiite). However liberating the 'sacred text' may be, this they concluded fundamentally challenged notions of democratic pluralism and liberalism relying on consultation, participation and contestation (Kramer 1997). Democracy then could never take root in Arab lands that, without external (i.e. Western) intervention, were doomed to eternally host a uniquely resilient

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[14] See Abed for a more informative account of the diversity of views that exist in the Muslim community (Abed 1995).

despotism.[15] By this very logic faith-based organisations that promoted Islam were no good for democracy.

A wave of critique flooded this 'Arab street' view of religion as political commentators and supporters of faith-based organisations joined in denouncing its impressionistic and anecdotal claims. Enlightened by Muslim modernist writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they drew attention to the lively debate and diverse interpretation of religious law and its democratic facets (Barakat 1993, Abed 1995, Wiktorowicz 2001, Salvatore and Eickelman 2004). They noted the struggle over the 'correct' meaning of a religion for which there is no single or accepted interpretation or spokesperson, and shed light on the historical and economic factors that have undermined democracy in the region (Carapico 1997, Ayoob 2005). They illuminated how religion influences political orientations (i.e. conservatism) less frequently in the Arab World than the secular West where individual differences in religion are starker (Tessler 2002, 350). As such they are optimistic about the prospects of civil society forcing the state to retreat, especially given its historical presence in for example Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and positive reinforcement by today's dense networks and flows of global communications and trade (Kubba 2000). For these authors then faith-based organisations may promote a new and very real era of democracy.

These views on faith-based organisations though need not be so dichotomous. If religion can be understood to have multiple, nuanced and often pro-democratic interpretations, faith-based organisations too should be seen as a heterogeneous group of varying democratising potentials. In doing so it becomes clear faith-based organisations are not the problem per se, rather it is their socio-political variants and party affiliations that, often forcefully, project party interests into the civil sphere and pave the way for a re-entry of the state.

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[15] In Ottaway and Carothers influential '*Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East',* Ottaway argues that in its stagnant state the Arab world will not democratise simply because it has not done so already (Ottaway 2005, 187).

The Quiet Passing of Independence: A Return to the Past?

In one of the few authoritive descriptions, Clarke presents five categories of faith-based organisations.[16] What is interesting is that he considers only 'faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organisations' as uncivil society, and something to be avoided.[17] This is despite defining faith-based 'socio-political' organisations, as "(those) which interpret and deploy faith as a political construct, organising and mobilising social groups on the basis of faith identities but in pursuit of broader political objectives" (Clarke 2008, 25). This is odd because it is precisely this pursuit of broader political objectives that undermines their ability to promote the independence and neutrality of civil society vis-a-vis the state. While civil society may work to engineer political change through lobbying and human rights monitoring, voter education and mobilisation etc., it must not aim to win formal power as this would compromise its ability to mediate and hold government to account (Diamond 1994, 6, Linz and Stepan 1996, 9). Chandhoke explains a democratic and "free civil society cannot exist if the principles of freedom are absent in its internal functioning" (Chandhoke 1995, 166). While Welzel and Inglehart draw attention to the importance of independence in supporting the establishment of 'self expression values' over 'survival values' that dominate non-democratic societies (Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Thus, in the words of one Director in Wassit, safeguarding the independence of liberal civil society,

> "will not be that easy because there are a lot of pressures on independent organisations and you could say a form of harassment from the parties and the politically affiliated organisations and so there are a lot of up-hill battles to face as independent organisations."

Democracy is undermined in other ways. By relying on and nurturing communal loyalties to support their political endeavours, socio-political faith-based organisations threaten to entrench religious and political cleavages. Any gains of liberal civil society in constructing an inclusive and pluralistic space for

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[16] These are defined as: faith-based representative organisations, faith-based charitable or development organisations, faith-based socio-political organisations, faith-based missionary organisations, and faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organisations.

[17] These are not of interest here as they present a clear and direct threat to civil society, and as demonstrated earlier are an internal oppression which the latter at least attempts to confront.

democracy thus risk being undermined or even lost. While Putnam first advanced the growth of any type of civically orientated organisation constitutes inter-group tolerance, dense communal networks were found to also generate civil strife and entrench exclusive communal identities when they did not cut across and unite different elements of society (Putnam 1993, Foley and Edwards 1996, Hardin in Dowley and Silver 2002, Berman, 1997). In Iraq, party affiliated organisations beyond Baghdad concentrate in their party's regional religious and/or political support bases, notably Najaf, Kerbala and Iraq's Southern regions.[18] The 2005 elections for example were noted for the Shi'ite religious symbolism that parties employed (al-Rahim 2005). In Baghdad one respondent described how they "promote the culture of religion and therefore promote the culture of the party and work to promote the parties that stand behind them". By promoting themselves as non-governmental, they undermine the secular and impartial social rehabilitation work of truly independent organisations. Or as another local group put it, "they give the rest of us a bad name".

Furthermore socio-political faith-based organisations appear particularly intolerant of other NGOs and so may prove detrimental to pluralism. This is a more specific problem than wider concerns of NGO politics, competition and poor collaboration well documented in the humanitarian and developmental literatures. Studying the projects of Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza, Roy describes the competitiveness, territoriality and unwillingness of its Islamic institutions in collaborating with others, especially non-Islamic NGOs (Roy 2000, 26). Equally in Iraq, genuine collaboration between widely different NGOs appears confined to secular and independent groups. Even within the women's rights movement which has drawn together party-affiliated and independent women's activists, the latter have found alliances with the former strained if not impossible. In their excellent analysis of the deterioration of women's freedoms in Iraq, Al-Ali and Pratt relay the experiences of one activist who describes with frustration how they are "competing with Islamists to provide a sack of rice...Secular women have been approached by Islamist women to put on a hijab. The Islamists even promise women positions if they start to wear the hijab" (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, 140). Thus while the 'common good' motives for their work often embody notions of civility conducive to democracy, differing visions of this 'common good' and constant attempts to implement it can breed exclusivity in day-to-day procedures and stir intolerance and sectarianism more generally.

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[18] Interview with an organisation working in Basra and active in Maysan, Amarra and Nassiriya.

As the thread linking the state and its political parties to their affiliated organisations and in turn their service users, socio-political faith-based organisations threaten to encourage a controlled and submissive civil society, similar to those of other Arab states. Many academics have, while noting the pockets of genuinely free civil society, lamented the overwhelming reality of group life in the form of a normalised patron-client relationship (Crystal 1996, Kubba 2000, Wiktorowicz 2001, Hebert 2003). Patronage relations were rampant under Ba'arth party rule and proved a stubborn challenge to liberal, independent civil society. Rather than confront them, the possibility these organisations entrench them was a theme touched on by the majority of interviewees and can be seen in the comments of one Director in central Iraq.

"In the people's minds once they go to these events they know that they are supported by certain political parties, because if they believe going to them will help in a moral sense with the government, meaning the government will support them when they need help. So when they have a relative that's looking for a job, a governmental job for example, when they go to these events they have a better chance of getting that job."

Finally they may be a means by which neighbouring states can project their foreign policies into Iraq. It is a quiet fact that significant aid continues to flow, usually via private agencies, between Arab countries (Neumayer in Clarke 2008, 21). In Iraq, Saudi Arabia has an incentive to support Sunni organisations and Turkey has clear interests in Kurdish communities in Northern Iraq. However it is Iran and its willingness to support Shiites and their organisations that has attracted most attention. The country has strong ties with various Iraqi parties and factions (such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Tehran-based SCIRI[19] and al-Da'wa al-Islamiya), profound links with religious communities[20], and has supported faith-based organisaitons elsewhere (notably Hamas and Hezbollah but also possibly Shiite movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan) (Hamzeh 1993, Kazemi 1996, Alterman 2003, Barzegar 2005). In the words of a Professor of International Relations at Tehran University speaking on the dissemination of Iran's Shiite ideology, "by way of Iraq, Iran can have direct

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[19] Its affiliated al-Badr Brigade is 10,000 strong force originally trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to fight Saddam's regime (Nasr 2004).

[20] Consider the network of ayatollahs and their organisations, friendship and martial relationships between Iranian and Iraqi clerics, the thousands of Iranian immigrants in Iraq, the 100,000 Iranian pilgrims that flocked to Karbala for the Ashura commemoration, the tombs of Imam Ali and Imam Hussein found in Najaf and Karbala respectively and the prestigious religious seminaries that have formed around them (Taremi 2005).

access to Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, through which it can penetrate even deeper to the west and south" (Taremi 2005, 29). He goes on to argue that of central importance was to ensure Iraq emerged as a 'friendly' state rather than a US 'client' state. From the very beginning Iran has heavily invested in Iraq's future. In August 2004 it established the Office for Iraq's Reconstruction allocating US$300m to post-war reconstruction efforts. How and to which organisations this money was distributed is not entirely clear. Thus while it is difficult to prove the extent and purpose of Iran's activities in Iraq, these are undoubtedly tied with socio-political faith-based organisations.

While of course no civil society is completely free of state interference, if the numbers of such party organisations are left to reach a critical mass within it they may powerfully influence its normative development at the very time it is being negotiated. Civil actors and citizens are defining its content (the degree of state interference, what actors are considered legitimately present), character (the extent to which it will be autonomous, diverse, robust, accountable and democratic), and purpose (its role in Iraq vis-à-vis the state). Its outcome has profound implications for the quality of the subsequent democracy, its supportive legislature and for whether oppressions are eradicated or simply transformed into more structural and cultural forms. Theoretically though, Iraq's veiled party organisations may act as contemporary vehicles through which the state and its dominant parties can articulate influence in the civil arena. What is more, neighbouring states too can influence its development. Through political associations civil counterparts can be subdued, party interests established and, according to Foley and Edwards, social resources locked up to block society's assistance to its poorer segments (Foley and Edwards 1996). One Director whose organisation works across Northern Iraq articulates this trend and its impact on the independence of organic, liberal civil society,

> "It makes it harder and I think more dangerous for the other NGOs to speak up and point out some problems and abuses that are coming out of the system of Government or political parties…so very many things are politically connected and if you're in a place where one political party is strong, people have special benefits and advantages if they are members of that party and if their organisation is somehow tied in with that political party, it's really hard to operate as an independent, politically neutral NGO".

This raises important questions. What is the minimum amount of independence civil society needs to promote democracy? What are the implications of civil society being submissive to the interests of political parties? Even when their absolute number is unclear, what are the consequences of their

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superior influence? Are faith-based development initiatives really the more appropriate way forward for international donors? These are salient issues in today's Iraq. Here, while respondents suggest party organisations account for anywhere between 25-75% of all civic organisations only 17% considered them to not be influential.[21] One respondent gave the example of the city of Diwaniyah where some 60 organisations served approximately 650,000 people in its centre and a further 350,000 in the surrounding villages. Of these only half were totally independent. Given their rise, civil society may lose the autonomy, pluralism, tolerance, and freedom to push for good governance reforms, tackle corruption and help resolve wide ranging issues including the future of Kirkuk, the question of federalism, and vital legislation on women's rights and the oil law.

Trading Autonomy: Civil Society's Failure to React

Compared with the physical violence it has faced and continues to face, civil society has been rather relaxed towards its new oppressions. The violence it engenders is subtle and structural and so taken to be innocuous. Worse still, the tendency of post-totalitarian societies to under-value their autonomy and independence causes many NGOs to affiliate with parties. Consequently they acquiesce if not assist their intrusion. The implications of this 'not-knowing' are bleak. Being unaware of its own internal oppressions, Chandohke argues, a civil society cannot become democratic (Chandohke 1995, 165). Bayart goes further claiming civil society exists only in so far as it is "self-conscious of its opposition to the state" (Bayart in Ikelegbe 2001, 3). By trading their autonomy they may unknowingly contribute to democracy's demise, that is "a gradual process of erosion and delegitimisation that destroys democratic regimes even as their surface institutions remain in place…the truly representative character of democracy is hollowed out from within" (Krastev 2002, 44). As such to be free and independent a civil society must know that it should be free and independent and recognise when it is not. When this awareness is weak due to legacies of state interference civil societies become vulnerable to manipulation and are ultimately lost.

What opposition there is small, lacking clout and financial support. The 'Civil Dialogue Forum' of 25-30 NGOs across Baghdad, Kirkuk and Diyala for example, gives voice to independent organisations

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[21] According to 15 NGO Directors.

marginalised by a Government that mainly deals with civic party organisations. Their attempts to launch a law separating civil and political society proved fruitless. Nonetheless they carry on accompanied by other small initiatives. 'Network for Change', a group of 50 wholly independent organisations, holds conferences on how to gain support and funding for their activities as one member from Dhi Qar explains.

> "We promote people's awareness as far as elections are concerned so that people know that these political NGOs are just pushing a certain program whereas we are truly working with the people, by the people, for the people".

However their activism has been pervaded with a sense of futility. One Director whose organisation worked in Basra, Baghdad and Arbil believed the sheer financial and human power behind party organisations, not to mention their media prowess, made them a formidable force. An event relayed by one Director working in Dhi Qar is suggestive of this.

> "They (the independent NGO) were able to obtain documents that showed that certain organisations that received funding have ties to the government…there were town hall meetings that they had with the local government and the public in their region where they presented these documents and this evidence that they had to the public…April, May and June of this year (2008) is when the meetings took place…as far as the members of the local government, the officials, they really didn't do anything and they didn't really have any reaction to the documents that were presented. As for the people, the people saw it but they don't have the power to have much to do with anything. So overall nothing really happened, there were no consequences to them in showing these papers to the public…however from the local government they did receive a warning (by phone) that basically stated they (the government) could pull their license if they wanted to and they also threatened that they could close down their office and so on."

It appears their weakness rests on the duality of Iraq's civil society that stifles any coherent and informed opposition. International organisations have tended to operate remotely and as such lack extensive grass-roots connections. Without the knowledge these afford, they cannot distinguish genuine, independent civil society's projects on democracy and human rights promotion from those

organised by political parties.[22] Clarke notes how "Western organisations may find it difficult to distinguish between the passive/active and the persuasive/exclusive among a range of Islamic charitable, representative or socio-political organisations" (Clarke 2008, 33). Furthermore some of the institutions they champion as secular reservoirs of civil society and use as networking points rarely grant permission for local bloc organisations to operate there. Rather, as one respondent describes, it is political party organisations that have "connections within the Universities administrations, so it's much easier for them to get permission to conduct activities inside university campuses".[23] In effect then Iraq's international bloc of civil society may be having little effect on the intrusion of the state .

Local civil society by contrast is preoccupied with countering the overt violence described and particularly burdened by inexperience and limited resources. There is a salient unfamiliarity with the purpose of civil society in Iraq beyond that of service provider. One Director from Diyala alludes to this when she explains "there is no effort currently to confront these organisations by us, it isn't our job to confront them, this isn't the nature of the work we do". Other organisations would describe how responsibility rested with Iraqi citizens for being ignorant of a particular project's party orientation. Many more are simply fearful of confronting them.[24] Worse still are those which, under severe financial strain, have opted to align with political party interests. Financing was a concern reported by all participants and most relied on volunteerism. 38% had requested government funding but repeatedly complained only organisations with close ties to Government received assistance. One recipient in the north noted how "newly formed organisations, because there are so many of them now, it's hard for them to get money".

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[22] A Director from a well-respected and substantial organisation working across Iraq who requested to remain anonymous explained: "there are many organisations that are affiliated with political parties, this is well known by people inside Iraq and these organisations execute activities that are financed by the political parties in addition to the financing they may receive from external sources…these other sources are international organisations, UN and so on and these activities are basically for the promotion of parties, they look like one thing on the outside but they are really something else on the inside…the international organisations are not aware of the true nature of these politically affiliated organisations because if they were they would not be funding them since their (international organisations, UN etc.) objectives and internal programs would not allow them to fund organisations that have a political agenda."

[23] This is particularly true of universities with sectarian identities such as Baghdad University and also Mustansiriya University which was subject to bombings in January 2007.

[24] 20% of those interviewed requesting to remain anonymous only after the issue of party organisations was raised.

Thus mass public mistrust, sectarian violence and illiberal state and non-state actors are easily recognisable and so more likely to be resisted, even by fledgling pro-democracy forces. However less overt internal oppressions fomenting structural violence, while perhaps met with suspicion, are unlikely to inflame public opposition when direct violence and insecurity reign. This is because inexperienced civil society organisations while pushing for democratisation may not, in light of their post-totalitarian past, be fully aware of their role and position vis-à-vis the state and the autonomy required to fulfill it. As such they may unwittingly accommodate those illiberal forces in chronically undermining a flourishing and diverse civil society. In the long run they could influence the normative development of what civil society should look like, determine the lines between state and civil society or how much illiberal activity it should accept. Theoretically, in their presence civil society organisations could fail to consolidate sufficient autonomy to contest or guide the state. If substantial independence is not achieved a civil society may emerge that lacks the agency to promote good governance.

Conclusion

The effective contribution of civil society to democratic transition and consolidation depends upon its ability to surmount both the apparent direct threats it can see and the evolving structural oppressions it cannot. Overt violence was recognised by all participants whose organisations in varying ways had sought to confront these challenges. Even the most fledgling among them could recognise the implications of doing nothing.

A more enduring obstacle for civil society is its pervasion by well-organised and influential political party organisations. Here while they look, walk and talk like NGOs, it is widely accepted they receive substantial funding from government and promote party interests. Comprising socio-political faith-based organisations and co-opted NGOs, their presence particularly since 2003 has met little resistance from a broadly acquiescent Iraqi society whose civil local and international blocs lack the coordination, resources and self-awareness to form anything more than a small opposition. Theoretically, by proclaiming themselves as 'legitimate' civic associations, these party organisations can influence Iraq's daily negotiations and contestations on its role, purpose and content in relation to the state. Practically, they threaten to reverse the gains made on overcoming Iraqi's distrust in civic associations and the political arena, reinforce ethnic cleavages created and widened from over six years of conflict, and undermine the work of truly independent groups in promoting liberal democratic principles. In addition to the overt threats presented by a) a post-totalitarian heritage and b) internal uncivil forces, liberal civil society must recognise and confront the political party oppressions in its midst. These predicate upon, and reinforce civil society's unfamiliarity with independence and autonomy from the state. This dual challenge limits its potential to promote good governance and push back the state, threatening the future quality of democracy in Iraq.

While the analysis here is limited by the small sample size, the familiarity and frequency with which participants spoke of these party organisations, and the efforts of NGO alliances to counteract them, gives weight to its findings. As such this otherwise undocumented trend deserves attention. Further investigation should perhaps seek to determine the extent of political party permeation of Iraq's civil society and explore how it may be better recognised and tackled both locally and internationally.

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