

Jun 4 2013

## Iraq today: The failure of re-shaping a state on sectarian and quota lines.

LSE IDEAS

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When King Faisal I was crowned to be the first King of Modern Iraq in 1921 he endeavoured to encourage the Iraqi people, despite their different lineages, to feel, behave and think as united Iraqis. This was depicted in the formation of all the major licensed and secret political parties, such as the Iraqi communist Party, the National Democratic Party, the Baath Party and others seeing as they all included Arabs, Kurds, Turcoman, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, Sabians and even Jews. Until the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 1946, there was no major sectarian or a one component party, and if they existed as secret ones they were with no major influence among the people or in Iraqi politics. Regardless of the Western media depictions of Iraq as a collection of people dominated by one sect that marginalized the others,

**this was Iraq's reality until 2003.**

With the occupying US -UK forces in 2003, there was an oversimplification of the Iraqi state – Iraq was reduced to a composition of Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, Assyrians, Turcomans and others. When Paul Bremer established the Governing Council [he chose people according to their sectarian, religious and ethnic origin](#), citing these affiliations after the name of each appointee. For example, when the leader of the Iraqi Communist Party was appointed in the Council, it was made clear that he was a Shiite on the roster. The Iraqi identity was totally erased from the dictionary of the occupiers. The socio-political division of Iraq was further exacerbated by other decisions built on the understanding that the Shiite and Kurds were oppressed and marginalized. Eventually they were given further power and preference. The [permanent constitution of 2005](#) clearly illustrated that. Thus instead of building a state with equal rights and responsibilities to all citizens, the Sunni Arabs were marginalized and left under the mercy of the ruling Shiite and Kurdish parties.

The events of the last few months – demonstrations and sit-ins in the major western Sunni dominated provinces – were mostly the result of Sunni's feelings of marginalization. Most dangerous to them were [Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's](#) attempts to oust some of their prominent leaders, such as [Tareq al-Hashemi](#), the vice president of the Iraqi republic, and [Rafie al-Issawi](#) the minister of finance, from their jobs by accusing them of having supported terrorist activities. This was coupled with the marginalisation of the deputy prime minister and the accusations leveled against the leader of the parliament for not performing his duties properly. All these men were Sunni leaders.

These decisions further shook the fragile stability of the country, which was already tense due to the sharp dispute and [confrontation between the central government and the Kurdish Regional Government](#). The latter was accused of taking decisions without the consent and approval of the central government. This resulted in numerous Sunni and Kurdish ministers pulling out of the cabinet. Nonetheless, Nuri al-Maliki continued his policies through an almost crippled cabinet, only to increase the suffering of the people who were already complaining about the lack of services and huge amount of corruption within the government.

Although the demonstrations and sit-ins were mostly peaceful, the prime minister did nothing constructive to comply with the demands of the protesters. Ineffective mediating committees were established but nothing was done to alleviate the grievance of these provinces. Nuri al-Maliki undertook two significant actions that only resulted in further confrontation with his adversaries. The elections in two major western provinces (Anbar and Mosul) were postponed – this only increased the discontent in those Sunni dominated areas while the fact that the Prime Minister ordered the armed forces to storm one major sit-in square in the [town of Hawija](#), in Kirkuk province, accusing the protestors of harboring terrorists and of killing soldiers encircling the square, resulted in the killing of 66. [Hawija was targeted](#) because the Prime Minister and his intelligence services believed that this particular sit-in area was infiltrated and led by the old Baathist elements and the influential Naqshabandi Islamic militia cooperating with them.

Tribal, religious and local leaders in the sit-in squares proved to be wiser than the prime minister and his coalition dominating the government. Despite the human losses they encouraged their supporters to maintain the peaceful nature of their protests.

The socio-political situation is still very critical, but the problem essentially remains between the government and the western provinces – not between the different communities. Talk about the possible renewal of inter-factional violence to Iraq died down once reconciliations were worked out (with the assistance of US intervention) between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG hereafter). As a result of the visit paid by the KRG prime minister to Baghdad, tension between the two sides decreased and the Kurdish ministers returned to attend the central government cabinet.

The Prime Minister's actions have only added to the exaggerated reports about a possible civil war in Iraq. In fact many tribal community leaders from the southern Shiite dominated areas have on many occasions declared their support to, and understanding of the western region's grievances. Even from within the Shiite governing coalition, which is the main source of support for the prime minister, there were calls to lessen the tension by complying with some of the demonstrators' legitimate demands.

Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki's inability to counter and take action regarding social and economic problems (namely, his failure to curb the huge amount of corruption, the failure to improve the services or the distribution of food rations and his inability to improve the security situation in Baghdad and other major cities) [highlights an uncertainty as to whether he could succeed in remaining in office for a next term.](#)

In spite of all the negative aspects of the Iraqi current political situation there are indications that the sectarian feeling and division that overwhelmed the country after 2003 is receding. People are publicly criticizing the use of sectarian feelings and division by Iraqi politicians for their own ends. This may be exemplified in the [coming general elections.](#)

The coming months will prove to be critical. If the government of Nuri al-Maliki continues to dither and a national reconciliation conference is not convened, internal stability could be jeopardized. This could be exacerbated by a spillover from the Syrian crisis as has been demonstrated by the return of al-Qaeda and Salafi fighters to Iraq. In the midst of this chaotic socio-political situation, the Iraqi people may find that a realization and solidification of their Iraqi identity is of utmost importance as it will prevent social suffering and keep a turbulent political spillover from Syria at bay.

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