

## **The Streets of Iraq: Protests, the Public Sphere and Democracy**

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### **Abstract**

Since the invasion of Iraq by Coalition forces in 2003, much attention has been paid to the violence ravaging Iraq's streets, so much so that they have become synonymous with bloodshed and chaos. This paper begins by countering this prominent view with a brief outline of some of the more positive scenes that have played out on Iraq's streets, including the successful elections of 2005 and 2009. The bulk of the paper builds on this discussion to detail the various protest movements that have emerged across Iraq since 2003, including those organised by Shia clerics, minority movements, women's organisations and Iraqi worker unions. This paper concludes by arguing that the willingness of normal Iraqi citizens to exercise their democratic right to protest indicates the degree to which democratic ideals are taking hold in Iraq and represents a fundamental step towards a more peaceful and inclusive future.

## Introduction

Since the US led 'Coalition of the Willing' invaded in 2003, the streets of Iraq have featured prominently in media and political discourse. Overwhelmingly, this coverage has emphasised the disorder and chaos found on these streets through depictions of horrific violence in the forms of suicide bombings, kidnappings, mortar attacks, sectarian hostility and the threat of all-out civil war. One might argue that the tendency of the Western media, academics and other commentators to emphasise the daily atrocities of post-Saddam Iraq has largely obfuscated the positive political developments there and has seen successful stories of Iraq's fledgling democracy buried beneath a seemingly endless reel of bloodshed and chaos. Where attention has been paid to the political landscape in Iraq it has tended to privilege disagreements and disunities between Iraq's myriad ethno-religious factions over an acknowledgement of the complexity of Iraqi politics and the highly inclusive and progressive nature of the deliberations being conducted.

Aside from emphasising the ongoing violence and the disagreements between Iraq's various ethno-religious groups, much of the coverage has argued that Iraq simply lacks the social and political prerequisites necessary to build towards democratic forms of governance. For example, Australian newspapers – particularly the Murdoch controlled paper, *The Australian* – have not managed to move beyond the reductive and simplistic framework of 'Oriental despotism' to offer a more varied and nuanced assessment of the political history of Iraq or the positive developments of the post-2003 era. Instead, *The Australian* has provided its readers with sensationalized stories of violence and pejorative op-eds about why Iraq is incapable of democracy (Isakhan, 2007, 2008a). However, to say that this kind of Orientalist coverage was limited to *The Australian* would seriously underestimate the pervasiveness of this discourse. To cite a further example, *USA Today* published an editorial by former US army officer, Ralph Peters, in which he both brings to the fore classically Orientalist rhetoric about the incompatibility of the Middle East and democracy while at the same time all but absolving the United States of any wrong-doing. He writes:

Yet, for all our errors, we did give the Iraqis a unique chance to build a rule-of-law democracy. They preferred to indulge in old hatreds, confessional violence, ethnic bigotry and a culture of corruption. It appears that the cynics were right: Arab societies can't support democracy as we know it... Iraq was the Arab world's last chance to board the train to modernity, to give the region a future, not just a bitter past. The violence staining Baghdad's streets with gore isn't only a symptom of the Iraqi government's incompetence, but of the comprehensive inability of the Arab world to progress in any sphere of organized human endeavour. We are witnessing the collapse of a civilization. (Peters, 2006)

Clearly, such Orientalist coverage of Iraq and its purported inability to democratise relies on assumptions not only about the despotic nature of the Orient, but also about the Occident and its tendency to democracy. Here, democracy is construed as something altogether Western, a gift from the pinnacle of human civilisation to the savages. That the Iraqis are unable to democratise is not seen as the fault of the

invading and occupying forces of the West, nor of the political system they tried to install, but is indicative of the backward and barbaric nature of the people.

However, there is in fact an entirely different story of democracy in post-2003 Iraq. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest a return to a civic culture in Iraq where the streets of the nation have concurrently developed into a 'public sphere'; a locus for varied deliberation, debate and discourse. For example, following the fall of the Ba'athist regime a complex array of political, religious and ethno-sectarian factions formed political parties and civil society movements, many of which have written policy agendas, engaged in complex political alliances and debated and deliberated over the key issues facing the state (Davis, 2004: 1, 3; 2007: 3). Most of these political factions also sponsor their own media outlets which were fervently produced and enthusiastically read by a populace thirsty for undoctored news. These organs not only fostered an Iraqi public sphere via their rich array of opinion and information from across the ideological and political spectrum, they also ushered in a renewed public culture of discussion as Iraqis openly debated the key issues of the day in markets, coffee houses and on the sidewalks. In the lead up to the elections and referendum conducted across Iraq in 2005, the streets of the nation came alive with colourful billboards pronouncing the intentions and policies of various groups, from secular parties to religious fundamentalists. Despite US and Iraqi government attempts to censor and interfere in Iraq's media and political landscape, Iraq's many partisan and non-partisan media outlets fulfilled their function as the Fourth Estate, providing the Iraqi citizens with a rich array of debate and discourse on key policies, politicians and parties (Isakhan, 2006, 2008b, 2009b). This was followed by the events of the elections themselves which saw millions of Iraqi citizens risk threats of further violence to line the streets of the nation, patiently waiting for their chance to take part in the first truly democratic elections held in Iraq for many decades. Here, Iraqis of all persuasions – young and old, Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, Christian and Muslim – filled the streets with their chatter and excitement. Some arrived early and then paraded their purple ink stained index fingers to the growing crowds; others arrived later, preferring to wait in the long queues as a sign of their solidarity and to discuss politics, religion and football with their friends and fellow citizens. These trends continued at the time of the January 2009 provincial elections in Iraq when the Iraqi government deemed it safe enough for the candidates name, rather than just their political affiliation, to appear on the ballot and allowed them to openly campaign in public. This saw campaign posters glued to walls all over Iraq while party volunteers handed out leaflets at security check-points. Others used more traditional tactics such as going door-to-door, doing radio interviews or calling public assemblies where ordinary citizens were invited to grill leading candidates on their policies (Isakhan, 2009a, 2009c, 2010).

Building on the above discussion this other story of Iraq's emerging public sphere, this chapter seeks to document and examine the Iraqi people's exercise of their democratic right to protest and the influence these protests have had on the political landscape of the post-Saddam era. Indeed, since 2003, the Iraqi people have frequently taken to the streets *en masse* to air their concerns about everything from the ongoing US-led occupation, the government's failure to provide basic security and infrastructure and the airing of 'indecent' programs on Iraqi television. This paper concludes by arguing that Iraqi citizens who play an active role in their own governance and participate in democratic mechanisms such as elections and mass

demonstrations are helping to create a more robust democracy. This paper also argues that at a time when democratic participation is at a demonstrable low in the West and when governments all but ignore major protest movements such as the anti-Iraq War rallies of late 2002 and early 2003, the protests held across Iraq demonstrate Iraqi receptivity to democracy and their willingness to challenge and scrutinise their government.

## **Protests and Democracy in post-Saddam Iraq**

The other story of democracy in post-Saddam Iraq begins at the very earliest days of the occupation. For example, almost immediately after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, Iraq witnessed a whole series of spontaneous elections. In northern Kurdish cities such as Mosul, in majority Sunni towns like Samarra, in prominent Shia cities such as Hilla and Najaf and in the capital of Baghdad, religious leaders, tribal elders and secular professionals called together town hall meetings where representatives were elected and plans were hatched for local reconstruction projects, security operations and the return of basic infrastructure (Booth, 2003; Booth & Chandrasekaran, 2003; Dawisha, 2005: 733-734; Gordon & Trainor, 2006: 490; Klein, 2007: 361-365). Such moves were initially supported by the occupying forces and there are records of US troops having played a facilitating role in the process, while even the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Lewis Paul Bremer III had initially planned to convene a national assembly in which representatives from all sectors of Iraq's complex society would elect an interim council (Klein, 2007: 362).

However, the US was quick to quell such indigenous drives towards democratisation and to exert its own hegemony over Iraq. Fearing that the people of Iraq would elect certain 'undesirables' such as military strongmen or political Islamists, Bremer decided that he would appoint the members of the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) and, by the end of June, he had further ordered that all local and regional elections were to be stopped immediately (Booth & Chandrasekaran, 2003; Klein, 2007: 363). This effectively meant that any decisions made by local councils were reneged and the mayors and governors who had been elected by their own constituents were replaced by hand-picked representatives, sometimes former Baathist cronies (Booth, 2003; Booth & Chandrasekaran, 2003). Not surprisingly, such moves met with staunch opposition across Iraq and prompted some of the earliest protests of the post-Saddam era. In the Shia holy city of Najaf, for example, hundreds of peaceful protestors took to the streets, demanding that the installed mayor be removed and replaced by a representative selected via free and fair elections. Several protestors carried placards reading "Cancelled elections are evidence of bad intentions" and "O America, where are promises of freedom, elections and democracy?" (as cited in: Booth & Chandrasekaran, 2003). Much larger demonstrations were conducted in Baghdad and Basra where thousands banded together to chant the words "Yes, yes, elections. No, no selections" (as cited in: Hendawi, 2003; Klein, 2007: 365).

Despite such warnings, the CPA attempted to go ahead with its plan to install a puppet government in Baghdad. Once again, such anti-democratic moves were widely contested across Iraq, particularly amongst the Shia, where senior religious figures

such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani<sup>1</sup> were able to mobilise thousands of Iraqis in protests that called for a general election prior to the drafting of the Iraqi constitution (Davis, 2005a: 115-117; 2005b: 59; Klein, 2007: 365; Polk, 2005: 181-182). Al-Sistani, a member of the quietist branch of the Shia faith took the unprecedented step of issuing several politically-motivated *fatwa*'s urging his clergymen to get involved in local politics and encouraging the faithful, including women, to protest key decisions and vote in elections. Reasoning that a greater involvement of the Shia majority in Iraqi politics would rectify the power imbalance that had swung in favour of the Sunni minority since the inception of the state in 1921 (Al-Rahim, 2005: 50), Al-Sistani began his religio-political campaign on 25 June, 2003 by issuing a *fatwa* that read:

These [occupation] authorities do not have the authority to appoint the members of the constitution writing council. There is no guarantee that this council will produce a constitution that responds to the paramount interests of the Iraqi people and expresses its national identity of which Islam and noble social values are basic components... There must be general elections in which each eligible Iraqi can choose his representative in a constituent assembly for writing the constitution. This is to be followed by a general referendum on the constitution approved by the constituent assembly. All believers must demand the realization of this important issue and participate in completing the task in the best manner. (Al- Sistani as cited in: Arato, 2004: 174)

By mid January 2004, the momentum of Al-Sistani's campaign to get democratic elections in Iraq had reached fever pitch. When the cleric called for protestors to join the cause, more than 100,000 Shia marched through Baghdad while a further 30,000 took to the streets of Basra (Jamail, 2004; Walker, 2005). Put simply, they demanded democracy. They called on the US occupation to conduct free and fair national elections that would enable the people of Iraq to nominate an Iraqi legislature (Aneja, 2004). They waved flags and chanted "Yes, yes to unification! Yes, yes to voting! Yes, yes to elections! No, no to occupation!" (as cited in: Jamail, 2004). Some carried banners with slogans such as "We refuse any constitution that is not elected by the Iraqi people", while one protestor told reporters that "If America won't give us the democracy they promised, we will make it for ourselves" (as cited in: Jamail, 2004). Demonstrating the power of the cleric these protests remained peaceful according to his instructions and when he announced that he had agreed to wait for a UN inspection team to study the situation, the protestors disbanded just as quickly as they had been assembled (Aneja, 2004; Finn, 2004).

However, if it was Al-Sistani who was to have the most impact over the political landscape of Iraq during the first few months of the occupation, it was the younger, more radical Moqtada Al-Sadr<sup>2</sup> who was to gain both notoriety and political influence

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<sup>1</sup> Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani comes from a long line of well-respected Shia theologians. He has gradually ascended the ranks of the clergy to become the pre-eminent Shia cleric in Iraq today. Despite the fact that quietist Shia clerics generally abstain from politics, Al-Sistani has become a central player in the post-Saddam political landscape and continues to have an enormous impact over key decisions and policies.

<sup>2</sup> Moqtada Al-Sadr has no formal religious training, his renown as a theologian being inherited from his father and former Grand Ayatollah Mohamad Sadiq Al-Sadr, who was assassinated by the Ba'ath in 1999 (Davis, 2008: 13; Stansfield, 2007: 61-62). In addition, Al-Sadr holds no official political position within the Iraqi government. Despite these limitations, he continues to have enormous influence over

in the years that followed. This arguably began when the CPA forced the closure of two organs produced by Al-Sadr, *Al-Hawza*<sup>3</sup> (the name of a particular Shia seminary in Najaf where a number of leading clerics teach) and the quarterly journal *Al-Mada* ('The View'). Both of these publications appear to have represented Al-Sadr's political and theological ideology, advocating an Islamic republic for Iraq and featuring vitriolic critiques of Israel and the American-led occupation (Rosen, 2004). Specifically, *Al-Hawza* was targeted for featuring articles with headlines such as 'America Hates Islam and Muslims' and its closure prompted thousands of protestors to gather at the paper's office in central Baghdad (Al-Sheikh, 2004; Gettleman, 2004; Rosen, 2004). Despite being relatively peaceful at the time, the protestors chanted slogans such as "No, no, America!" and "Where is democracy now?", also vowing to avenge *Al-Hawza*'s closure (Al-Sheikh, 2004; Gettleman, 2004). In a twist of irony, it was the forced closure of *Al-Hawza*, rather than anything printed across its humble pages, which ultimately garnered Al-Sadr renewed reverence amongst his already loyal followers and arguably incited his *Mahdi Army* to violence (Al-Marashi, 2007: 132; Rosen, 2004).

Indeed, throughout 2004 Al-Sadr led several military uprisings against the occupation. These events brought Al-Sadr a sudden notoriety, they helped refine his mastery of anti-occupation political rhetoric and distinguished him against Al-Sistani as a strong militant religious leader who had both the strength and the gall to take on the United States. However, when his military campaigns consistently failed, Al-Sadr employed a new arsenal of weapons in his struggle against the occupation from 2005 onwards. These included a dramatic shift in approach from armed resistance to (mostly) non-violent political struggle, an evolution in rhetoric that saw him change from fire-brand pro-Shia Islamism to calls for tolerance, national unity and social inclusion, and the effective transformation of the *Mahdi Army* from militia to social welfare organisation. As part of this shift, Al-Sadr, following in the footsteps of Al-Sistani, began to capitalise on his enormous support base and mobilised them regularly in co-ordinated protests across Iraq. For example, on the two year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq (April 2005), Al-Sadr effectively orchestrated massive protests in Baghdad. His supporters marched the 5 kilometres from the Shia district of the capital, Sadr city, to Firdos square where the US had torn down the giant bronze statue of Saddam in their attempt to look like the liberators and not the invaders of Iraq in 2003. Thousands travelled from all over the nation to attend these peaceful protests making them one of the largest political rallies in Iraqi history (Cole, 2005c; Flower, Mohyeldin, Mount, Starr, & Tawfeeq, 2005; "Iraqis stage huge anti-US protest," 2005; Jasim, 2005). They chanted anti-occupation slogans while a statement read on behalf of Al-Sadr claimed "We want a stable Iraq and this will only happen through independence... There will be no security and stability unless the occupiers leave... The occupiers must leave my country" (as cited in: Al-Khairalla, 2005b).

What was particularly interesting here was that Al-Sadr ordered his followers to only wave Iraqi flags and not those of the *Mahdi Army* or other Shia organisations. This

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Iraqi politics due to his legion of loyal followers, his political faction the *Sadr Trend* (or Sadrist Movement), the military strength of his *Mahdi Army* and the collection of media outlets his organisation controls. He has been vitriolic in his critique of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq and continues to call for their withdrawal.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that *Al-Hawza* appears to have re-opened since 2004, currently published under the defiant moniker *Al-Hawza Al-Natiqa* (Al-Marashi, 2007: 139).

was a clear attempt to move the protests beyond a pro-Al-Sadr, Shia-backed movement to more of a nationalist struggle against occupation, something which would appeal to Iraqis of all persuasions. At the time, a spokesperson for Al-Sadr, Sheikh Abdul-Hadi Al-Daraji is reported to have said “Many of our brothers, including Sunnis, have welcomed the call and will take part” (Al-Daraji as cited in: "Anti-US protest mark anniversary of Saddam's overthrow," 2005). This was to prove true with a number of Sunnis attending the Baghdad protests and a small contingent of Iraqi Christians carrying placards that read “We support the call of Sayyed Muqtada for national unity” (Cole, 2005c). Concurrent protests were also coordinated by the Association of Muslim Scholars in the Sunni city of Ramadi and attended by around 5000 protestors (Carl, 2005; Cole, 2005a). These massive anti-occupation protests, organised by Al-Sadr, have become an ongoing annual event in Iraq with successful and largely peaceful demonstrations having been conducted each year since 2005 (Ahmed, 2009; Al-Obaydi as cited in: "Iraqi Shia protest in holy city," 2007; Al-Nassiri as cited in: "Six years on, huge protest marks Baghdad's fall," 2009). In addition, the followers of Al-Sadr have also organised several other demonstrations concerning more pragmatic problems. For example, in the Sunni-dominated city of Samarra hundreds of Al-Sadr’s followers have repeatedly demonstrated against the lack of basic infrastructure and public services such as electricity, fuel, potable water, the high cost of ice and the increasingly bleak employment market ("39 killed by insurgents," 2005; Cole, 2005b)

Following up on the strength of these protests, Al-Sadr has further demonstrated his keen political instincts and acute knowledge of democratic mechanisms. For example, in 2005, he instructed his followers to collect the signatures of one million Iraqis in a petition that asked the US and Coalition troops to leave the country immediately. More recently, in March 2008, Al-Sadr launched a nation-wide civil disobedience campaign in response to a series of raids targeting the clerics offices and the subsequent arrest of a number of members of his organisation. In several key Baghdad neighbourhoods, such as Mahmoudiya and Yusufiya members of the *Mahdi Army* marched in a show of force while in Abu Disher the streets were emptied, the stores closed and the schools vacated in protest (Tawfeeq, Wald, & Sterling, 2008). Then in October 2008, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets of Sadr city and in the south-eastern province of Missan in support of Al-Sadr’s expressed concerns about the Parliament’s consideration of a new draft of the US-Iraqi Security pact that would extend US troop presence until 2011 ("Sadr Supporters Protest Planned US-Iraqi Security Agreement," 2008; "Sadrist protest in Missan against Iraqi-U.S. agreement," 2008). When the Iraqi Government ignored their protests and signed the deal, Al-Sadr’s followers re-appeared in the streets, this time burning an effigy of President George W. Bush to illustrate their contempt. One senior supporter of Al-Sadr read a message the cleric had written at the rally which stated that “This crowd shows that the opposition to the agreement is not insignificant and parliament will be making a big mistake if it chooses to ignore it... The government must know it is the people who help it in the good and the bad times. If it throws the occupier out, we will stand by it” (Chulov, 2008).

While it would be stretching the limits of the term to refer to Al-Sistani and Al-Sadr as democrats, they are at the very least intimately familiar with the trappings and protocols of democratic government and know how to employ its mechanisms to great effect. Both leaders realised very quickly that the Shia were the majority in Iraq and

that by utilising their support base they would be able to wield considerable power. To do this, Al-Sistani took the unprecedented step of issuing religious edicts that rejected US plans to install a puppet government and called upon the faithful to vote. As Ruel Marc Gerecht has pointed out, Al-Sistani's *fatwas* were less of a religious edict and more of a "...flawlessly secular proclamation that clearly and consistently established 'the people' as the final arbiters of Iraq's political system" (Gerecht, 2004). Similarly, Al-Sadr has been able to call on his legion of followers to protest against the occupation to great effect, he has also demonstrated against laws considered by the parliament, utilised other democratic mechanisms such as petitions and civil disobedience, and he has argued in favour of the power of the people. Together the actions of Al-Sistani and Al-Sadr contradict the common belief that Iraqi 'culture' or, more broadly, Islam are incompatible with democracy. In fact, the argument can be made that whatever the shortcomings of democracy in Iraq today it exists because Islamic clerics demanded it, not because US idealists imposed it.

It is undeniable however, that the key reason the Shia protests have been so effective is the fact that they make up the majority of Iraq's population. This is not true of smaller minorities in Iraq, such as the Sunni (around 20%), the Kurds (around 20% and the Iraqi Christians (around 3%) who simply cannot command such impressively large demonstrations. Nonetheless, these smaller minorities have also been able to utilise the power of the streets in order to air their concerns and advocate political change. For example, the Sunni minority conducted some of their earliest protests in the form of general strikes in resistance to US blockades of Sunni cities. In Ramadi for example, the entire town shut down for two days as US troops launched a major offensive across the Sunni region. As Sheikh Majeed Al-Gaood described it "...a call came from the mosques for a general strike in Ramadi and neighbouring towns. Schools, markets and offices shut down in protest at the blockade... The civilian and military resistance distributed leaflets call[ing] for the two-day strike" (Al-Gaood as cited in: Assaf, 2005).

Such Sunni protests were to gather increased momentum as the former ruling minority found themselves increasingly ostracized by the central government. The majority of Sunnis – in a sign of resistance to US occupation and their decreased role in the new Iraq – chose electoral abstention in the January 2005 elections, creating a situation in which they were largely marginalised by the Shia and Kurdish dominated government. This has had a devastating effect on the political landscape of post-Saddam Iraq and the Sunni position has never fully recovered. This situation did however lead to several Sunni-run protests being conducted against the central government, such as those attended by around one thousand Sunni Arabs just outside the Green Zone in 2005. This particular protest accused the Iraqi Government of using torture and death squads on a sectarian basis against their community (Cole, 2005b). Later in the year, Sunni demonstrations were held in the towns of Hit, Ramadi, Samarra and Mosul against the only Sunni party to have gained any political momentum in 2005, the Iraqi Islamic Party. The issue at stake was the fact that the party had endorsed the plans of the US and the Iraqi Government to go ahead with a nation-wide referendum in October 2005 that was designed to ratify the Iraqi constitution drawn up by the government. Again, the Sunnis felt that they had had little say in this constitution due to their lack of political representation. They took to the streets *en masse* in an attempt to convince the party that if they continued to



endorse such proposals they would ultimately lose credibility and support among their Sunni constituents (Nasr, 2005).

One of the most sensitive issues of post-Saddam Iraq has been the status of multi-ethnic cities like Mosul and Kirkuk in the north. Ostensibly, these cities form part of the Kurdish traditional homeland, known as Kurdistan, but many Sunnis were repatriated there under the Ba'athist regime in an attempt to reduce the area of land controlled by the Kurds. Since 1991, the Kurds have had a relative degree of autonomy and, since 2003, their increased political might has seen them actively pursue the issue of returning these key northern cities to the Kurds. Compounding the problem is the fact that Kirkuk is one of the most oil rich regions in Iraq, making it a prized economic asset for any who manage to control it. Not surprisingly, this has met with staunch opposition from the Sunni residents of the northern cities. In Mosul for example, the Sunni population have frequently taken to the streets in protests against what they see as the Kurdish domination of Nineveh's regional administration (Nourredin, 2005). Most recently, 2008 saw the Sunni population of the Baghdad suburb of Adhamiyah protest moves by Kurds to incorporate the oil province of Kirkuk into the autonomous Kurdish region ("Hundreds protest in Baghdad over Kirkuk's status," 2008).

At around the same time, the Kurds were also conducting their own protests regarding Kirkuk. Thousands gathered in cities such as Sulaymanyah, Arbil, Kirkuk and Dohuk after the Iraqi Parliament passed a law that would see a power-sharing arrangement devised for Kurdistan's multi-ethnic cities ("Hundreds of Kurds protest in northern Iraq," 2008). In both Sulamanyah and Dohuk, the protestors submitted a warrant of protest to the UN Secretary General, the Iraqi President, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Parliament, asking the law to be revoked ("Duhuk demo ends by presenting warrant of protest against elections law," 2008; "Protestors in Sulaimaniya present warrant of protest against election law," 2008). However, the Kurds have also rallied against the inequities they see across their own region. For example, during both March and August of 2006 and more recently in August of 2008, a series of largely peaceful demonstrations broke into angry protest against the KRG and its failure to provide basic public services to the region ("1 killed, 4 wounded in protest march in Arbil," 2008; Hama-Saeed, 2007; Ridolfo, 2006).

Caught in the political and sectarian cross-fire of post-Saddam Iraq, smaller ethno-religious minorities, such as the Turkomans, the Faili Kurds (Shiite Kurds) and the Christian minority of Iraq (made up mostly of Syriac speaking Assyrians) are often forgotten alongside the three larger ethno-sectarian groups. Sadly, these small Iraqi minorities have been the victims of much violence and harassment with many having left the country for fear of their lives (Isakhan, 2005). However, they have nonetheless been politically active with some minor successes occurring via their inclusion in various allegiances and coalitions with the larger groups, their small number of media outlets and the handful of political portests they have staged since 2003. For example, in 2008, hundreds of Iraqi Christians demonstrated across key towns in northern Iraq such as Qosh, Karabakh, Tell-esqope and Dohuk among others. They chanted slogans and carried banners expressing their indignation at not being able to elect their own representatives in the provinces in which they live and also called for autonomy in their ancestral homeland. The President of the Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac Council,

Jameel Zito, spoke to the crowds stating “Our rights to elect our own representation has been denied therefore we demand our right to self-government, because this is the only way to ensure our rights in our homeland” (Zito as cited in: Hakim, 2008).

However, not all of the protests of post-Saddam Iraq have been conducted along ethno-religious lines. Indeed, Iraq has also seen a variety of civil movements emerge that are not so much concerned with issues regarding ethno-religious rights, their resistance to occupation or their rejection of state policy, but the plight of normal Iraqi citizens; ordinary people who demand better working conditions, higher salaries, safer environs and better infrastructure. While many of these protests have occurred in very specific ethno-religious areas and are at times made up entirely of one particular ethno-religious group, the central impetus of these protests is the peoples struggle for a more inclusive and equitable future. For example, the Iraqi people have repeatedly protested against corruption and nepotism in their local and national governments and in government departments such as the Iraqi police force. As early as 2005, residents of the Sunni city of Tikrit were rallying against the killing of the local council’s head official and demanding the resignation of the deputy governor and police chief because they were suspected of being responsible (“Iraqi police open fire on 1,000 demonstrators,” 2005). A month later in the Shia city of Basra, around 5000 residents, frustrated by the deteriorating security situation, took to the streets to demand the resignation of senior provincial police and army officers for not improving security. Indicating the democratic spirit in which such protests are conducted and received in post-Saddam Iraq, the Police chief, General Abdul-Jalil Khalaf, responded to the protests by stating “...today’s demonstration was a natural right of the citizens and the political parties to express their opinions” (Khalaf as cited in: “Mass protest over Basra insecurity,” 2008). Indeed, such groups have continued to express their opinions with dozens of protestors in the Shia Muthana province marching against corruption and to call for the sacking of key provincial officials. They accused the local government of monopolising decision making and resources, and therefore failing to deliver on key services and development projects (“Dozens rally demonstrations to protest corruption in Muthana,” 2008). In Jasan, a small town in the Wassit province in the east of Iraq, residents protested against their local government due to low drinking water and irrigation water supplies in the area. The demonstrators handed over a list of their demands to the local council including the forming of a committee to investigate the water problem, the dismissal of the manager of water resources and the removal of anyone found to have violated the laws governing the district’s water project (“Border town residents demonstrate protesting water crisis,” 2008).

Women’s rights have also become a particular concern in post Saddam Iraq with Iraqi women of all ethnicities and religious persuasions having come up with their own powerful protest campaigns since the invasion in 2003. For example, various women’s rights and social justice activists joined forces in a group known as “Women’s Will” who have organised a boycott of US goods which have flooded the Iraqi market since the invasion. One of the leaders of the group is reported to have argued

We are now living under another dictatorship, you see what kind of democracy we have, seems more like bloodocracy. You see what kind of liberation they brought: unemployment, murder and destruction. We must

resist this, it is the right of any occupied people to resist. Especially the women, we can use the simplest weapons of resistance, a financial boycott. (as cited in: Carr, 2005)

Along similar lines June 2005 saw massive protests organised by various Islamic human rights and women's rights organisations in Mosul to press for the immediate release of all Iraqi women in US custody. So effective was this campaign that the US was forced to release 21 Iraqi women in Mosul who had been held as a bargaining chip against relatives suspected of resistance (Al-Din & El-Yassari, 2005). More recently, a sole Iraqi female activist by the name of Farah Al-Jaberi conducted her own protest at the entrance to the Green Zone in Baghdad in 2008. Al-Jaberi, a traditional and conservative woman, held aloft a large placard of a naked woman accompanied by the words: "From the American to the [female] Parliamentarian: Either no clothes or the American prison". Al-Jaberi employed this shock tactic in protest of the scanning technology being used at various check points in the Green Zone which allegedly penetrated clothing and allowed security guards, often males, to see a naked image of the woman (Flintoff, 2008).

In addition to protests against corruption, nepotism and women's rights, Iraq has also seen a powerful workers movement emerge in recent years. Across Iraq doctors, nurses, taxi drivers, university staff, police, customs officers and emergency service personnel have repeatedly used non-violent protests, strikes, sit-ins and walk-outs. They have done so in order to draw attention to important issues such as their poor working conditions, the interference they are subjected to from various forces, the pressures under which they work, unfair dismissals, ineffectual government regulation and the dangerous nature of their jobs (Al-Dulaimy & Allam, 2005; Al-Khairalla, 2005a; Assaf, 2005; Cole, 2005a; "Customs officers protest transfer decision," 2008; Hassan, 2005; "IRAQ: Protests mount over insecurity in Basra," 2008; "Work in Diala university suspends, in protest to president's arresting," 2008). Perhaps the best example of such civil protests in Iraq have been those coordinated by the nations largest and most powerful independent union, the General Union of Oil Employees (which was later renamed the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions [IFOU]). The union is led by President Hassan Jumaa Awwad Al-Asady and has over 26,000 members throughout the ten state oil companies operating in the south of Iraq. The IFOU began to really flex its political muscles in May 2005 when it held a conference against the privatisation of Iraq's oil industry. Aiming directly at the complicity of certain Iraqi politicians in US plans to privatise Iraqi oil, the conference called upon "...members of Parliament...to take a firm stand against political currents and directives calling for the privatisation of the public sector in Iraq" in addition to their demand that all states "...remit the odious debts undertaken by the previous regime, without condition and without infringing the independence, sovereignty and economic self-governance of Iraq" ("Iraqi oil workers hold 24-hour strike - oil exports shut down," 2005).

By June of 2005, around 15,000 workers at the Southern Oil Company (SOC) conducted a peaceful 24 hour strike, cutting most oil exports from the south of Iraq. This particular strike was conducted in support of demands made by Basra Governor Mohammad Al-Waili that a higher percentage of Basra's oil revenue be invested back into the regions infrastructure including addressing issues such as sewerage, electricity, medical needs, poverty, malnutrition and unemployment. At the time, Al-Waili is quoted as saying that "Faced with a pathetic and unjust situation, our moral

responsibility leads us to demand in the name of our people a fair share of resources” (Al-Waili as cited in: "Iraqi oil exports suspended for few hours by strike," 2005). In addition, the IFOU also demanded the removal of 15 high ranking Ba’ath loyalists in the SOC and the Ministry of Oil as well as a salary increase for the workers ("Basra oil workers out on strike," 2005; "Iraqi oil exports suspended for few hours by strike," 2005; "Iraqi oil workers hold 24-hour strike - oil exports shut down," 2005). By July of 2005, IFOU was joined by the Trade Union Committee and the Union of Unemployed to form the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions. Together they staged a mass demonstration that marched towards the city hall of Nasariya protesting against corruption in the energy sector and demanding the resignation of senior officials ("Union of unemployed in Nasirya is invited as a member of the energy employees negotiation striking team," 2005)

Two years later, in May 2007, the IFOU threatened to strike again, but this was delayed when a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki resulted in the formation of a committee tasked with working on finding solutions acceptable to both sides ("IRAQ: Oil workers on strike in Basra," 2007). However, when the government failed to deliver on any of its promises by June, the oil workers went on strike across southern Iraq, bringing an immediate halt to the free flow of oil products, kerosene and gas to much of the country. In total, the IFOU came up with a list of 17 demands which included improvements to wages, health benefits and other working conditions, as well as consultation on the proposed oil law which the union opposed. They also called for the sacking of the general manager of the SOC and for the financial and administrative independence of the company from the Baghdad-based central ministry ("Iraq government orders arrest of oil workers' leaders," 2007; "IRAQ: Oil workers on strike in Basra," 2007).

A few days later, the Iraqi government responded by issuing arrest warrants for leaders of IFOU including Awwad in an attempt to clamp down on industrial action. At the time, Sami Ramadani who runs IFOU’s support committee in the UK pointed out that “Issuing a warrant for the arrest of the oil workers’ leaders is an outrageous attack on trade union and democratic freedom” (Ramadani as cited in: "Iraq government orders arrest of oil workers' leaders," 2007). In the face of such intimidation the union held firm, taking the further step of closing the main distribution pipelines, including supplies to Baghdad ("Iraq government orders arrest of oil workers' leaders," 2007). After several days of meetings and much political deliberation, Awwad released a statement which claimed:

Finally the workers have won in demanding their legitimate rights... And after deliberations...the two sides agreed to halt the strike and to use dialogue in dealings to resolve the outstanding issues... Therefore we would like to say to all that the workers will is indestructible. The workers can achieve what they want by the means available to them and their strength. And the oil workers are very strong, because they have a legitimate right... Long live the Iraqi working class. (Awwad, 2007)

Despite the long and arduous struggles of the various ethno-religious, women’s and workers protest movements that have sprung up across Iraq since 2003, there can be no doubt that the actions of one sole protestor has eclipsed them all. This protestor is Muntadhar Al-Zeidi, a 30 year old Iraqi journalist and his lone protests was the

provocative, symbolic and instantly effective action of throwing his shoes at US President George W. Bush. Al-Zeidi, who worked for the Cairo-based Iraqi TV station *Al-Baghdadiya* (“The Baghdad”), was present at a news conference attended by Bush during his surprise visit to the country in mid-December 2008. When Bush argued that the Iraq war had been necessary and that it was not over, Al-Zeidi shouted in Arabic “This is a farewell kiss, you dog” before hurling his shoes, one at a time, at the US President, “This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq” (as cited in: “Iraq rally for Bush shoe attacker,” 2008). Bush ducked both shoes and Iraqi security personnel nabbed Al-Zeidi and dragged him screaming out of the room. As images of Al-Zeidi’s one-man protest beamed out on news channels across the world and received millions of hits on the internet, the journalist was detained at the Headquarters of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and then taken into custody by the Iraqi army. The following day, thousands of citizens rallied in support of Al-Zeidi and demanded his release. For example, in Al-Zeidi’s hometown of Sadr city, crowds gathered and called for their ‘hero’ to be released immediately. There were also smaller protests in Basra, Najaf and Nasariya with some demonstrators chanting “Bush, Bush, listen well: Two shoes on your head” (as cited in: “Thousands of Iraqis protest arrest of shoe-throwing journalist,” 2008) (see also: “Iraq rally for Bush shoe attacker,” 2008; “Shoe-throwing Iraqi journalist could face prison sentence,” 2008). At the same time, the senior management at *Al-Baghdadiya* called for his release saying that he was exercising freedom of expression and the station began a sustained on-air campaign (“Iraq rally for Bush shoe attacker,” 2008; “Thousands of Iraqis protest arrest of shoe-throwing journalist,” 2008). At the opening of his trial in February 2009, Al-Zeidi was greeted by cheers when he entered the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, and again when he argued that he had not intended to harm President Bush or to embarrass Prime Minister Maliki but instead acted in reaction to “...the humiliation Iraq has been subjected to due to the US occupation and the murder of innocent people... I wanted to restore the pride of the Iraqis in any way possible, apart from using weapons” (Al-Zeidi as cited in: Salahedd, 2009). In March 2009 Al-Zeidi was sentenced to three years in prison for assaulting a foreign head of state during an official visit, with the sentence being reduced down to one year following an appeal in April (Londono & Mizher, 2009).

What is particularly interesting about these civil protests in Iraq is not just the commitment of ordinary citizens to actively utilise the mechanisms of democratic governance to effectively voice their concerns and influence politics, it is also the degree to which they are highly co-ordinated and peacefully conducted. The protests conducted by Iraq’s taxi drivers, hospital staff, police, women’s groups and especially the IFOU are often large and complex logistical operations that would involve much behind the scenes co-ordination, meetings and agreements. These citizens are actively communicating with each other, engaging in lengthy debates and deliberations and negotiating their concerns with the powers that be. At odds with the overwhelming view that the streets of Iraq are the locus of spontaneous acts of violence and barbarity, these well organised and peaceful protests demonstrate the depth of democratic culture in Iraq and the successful use of the power of the people to effect political change.

## Conclusion

There are several very interesting points to be made about the series of protests occurring across Iraq in the years that have elapsed since 2003. Firstly, the indigenous, localised and highly co-ordinated movements that sprung up across Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the war reveal the strength of the Iraqi peoples will towards democracy and, that when given the opportunity to make this will a reality, they are more than capable of utilising democratic mechanisms independent of foreign interference. It also indicates the degree to which democratic practises and culture are familiar to the people of Iraq. Far from alien or somehow uniquely “western”, the Iraqi people implicitly understand that by taking to the streets their newly elected democratic government must take into account their opinions. They have also been able to successfully use protests against the US and their self-proclaimed status as a harbinger of democracy in the Middle East. Indeed, the fact that the US was so determined to shut down this democratic impetus is also revealing in that it demonstrates the US administration’s desire to exert their hegemony over the Iraqi people via an installed government rather than to foster and encourage genuine democratic reform. Beyond this, it is also worth noting that when the United States attempted to eschew democracy in favour of a puppet government, it was the power of the Iraqi people which put in motion a series of events that led to the formation of an Iraqi government that was elected by the Iraqi people in free and fair elections.

It is also worth noting that these political protests would certainly not have been permitted under the former regime. The Ba’ath routinely suppressed political dissent and displays of the kind of mass public dissatisfaction that we have seen across Iraq since 2003 were rare. The fact that these recent political protests have been so successful and peaceful is demonstrative of the Iraqi people's ability to move beyond the tyranny and oppression of the past and their rapid uptake of the freedoms and responsibilities that come with democracy. What is also interesting here is that at a time when public protests are not only waning but seem ineffective in influencing governments across the Western democratic world – as the anti-Iraq war protests illustrate – the protests in Iraq remain of great influence and power. In a sense, these protests illustrate that while apathy is growing in the West and governments routinely ignore the opinions of the people, these hallmarks of democracy are alive and well in post-Saddam Iraq.

With the next round of Iraqi elections scheduled for December 2009, this resurgence of the Iraqi citizenship playing an active role in their own governance as well as their participation and engagement with democratic mechanisms such as elections, an independent press and mass demonstrations are of central importance to the strengthening and deepening of this fledgling democracy. Specifically, a strong protest movement is not only crucial in re-establishing a participatory and engaged public culture, but it can also help to abate the many conflicts across Iraq and thereby aid the shift towards a free, egalitarian and democratic nation.

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Since the US led "Coalition of the Willing" invaded in 2003, the streets of Iraq have featured prominently in media and political discourse. Overwhelmingly, this coverage has emphasized the disorder and chaos found on these streets, and has done so through depictions of horrific violence in the forms of suicide bombings, kidnappings, mortar attacks, improvised explosive devices, sectarian hostility and the threat of all-out civil war. One might argue that the tendency of the Western media, academics and other commentators to emphasize the daily atrocities of post-Saddam Iraq has largely obscured Centralization and Democratic Backsliding. Iraq's young and active citizenry demonstrates the energy of the people and their ability to apply pressure on the state to deliver. Iraq has the elements necessary to build a better future. The Iraqi people remain the country's best hope to propel reform and prevent instability. It will take a combination of military and financial pressure, attention to public grievances, and the repatriation and rehabilitation of people who lived or fought with ISIS—as well as those who were subjugated by them—to foil the militant group's ambitions, according to senior U.S. officials. This already tall ask has been made even more challenging by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Why young Iraqis took to the streets in protests that left more than 100 people dead after a brutal suppression. Anger on the streets: protesters in al-Tayaran square in central Baghdad on October 4. Murtaja Lateef/EPA. Email. Twitter. The latest protests may have been suppressed but they revealed that democracy in Iraq is nothing but a facade. What sort of democratic government kills its own people, taking away their hopes and dreams? And can it still be called legitimate? Crisis-ridden Iraq has been plagued by violent protests that have left dozens dead. Anger over living conditions in the country shows no sign of abating, but what exactly is fueling it? Those protests were sparked when thousands of Iraqis fell ill from drinking contaminated water. This time, the protests appear to be more spontaneous in nature. Nevertheless, they seem to have been touched off, in part, by the firing of Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, a popular general who previously served as second-in-command of Iraq's counterterrorism service. Al-Saadi was an important figure in the fight against the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) terror group. Recently he was transferred to another post. Anti-government protests have erupted on a regular basis in Iraq in recent years. The unrest started on 1 October, when people took to the streets of Baghdad and in the south to express their anger at endemic corruption, high unemployment, dire public services and foreign interference. The prime minister has resigned in response, but protesters want to sweep away the entire political establishment.