

# The New Iraqi Opposition

The anti-establishment movement after the 2021 elections

CRU Report

Marsin Alshamary



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## **About the author**

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# Summary

At the start of Iraq's longest government formation process in October 2021, one key question on everyone's mind was whether Iraq might get its first majoritarian government. The Sadrist Movement tried for months, but ultimately Muqtada Al-Sadr conceded defeat by calling on his MPs to resign. The result was another consensus government with all the traditional political parties sharing the spoils, minus the Sadrists. A second key question on everyone's mind was whether a genuine parliamentary opposition could develop in Iraq given the election of many independent MPs and the rise of reformist parties. This brief outlines the conditions needed for such a parliamentary opposition to emerge, discusses both technical and political elements, and analyses the challenges facing the 'new Iraqi opposition', i.e. veteran independent politicians, civil society activists and even former members of established parties. It argues that a sound electoral environment, unification of reformist parties and a higher turnout can contribute to making meaningful opposition a reality, which is needed to confront Iraq's collusive democracy.

# Introduction

One of the enduring criticisms of democratic practices in Iraq is the absence of a parliamentary opposition. Since the first parliamentary election in 2005 to the early election of 2021, each government formation process has produced a consensus government or, as disenchanted Iraqis may describe it, a government of collusion. Therefore, despite the peaceful transfer of power between prime ministers, there is no transfer of power between ruling and opposition parliamentary coalitions. On the contrary, competition between political parties is kept within the confines of a national consensus government and, when it threatens to escape, it raises the specter of violence. This begs the question – can a parliamentary opposition emerge in Iraq and under what conditions? More importantly, can a parliamentary opposition shake the stagnancy of Iraq’s political system and usher in a period of improved governance? After all, some experts consider parliamentary opposition an essential tenet of democracy, along with free and fair elections and civic freedoms.<sup>1</sup>

Iraq’s current political system is criticised for its poor performance, especially its inability to provide an adequate level of basic services, restrain corruption and deal effectively with major crises like Covid-19. As a result, many of the system’s elements have come under scrutiny, including its consociationalism, consensus governments, large electoral districts, and the logic of having a parliamentary system (as opposed to a presidential one). In this context, this brief examines the emergence of a broader opposition movement, how this movement seeks to engage with Iraq’s current political system and what it considers as a viable path for progress, including whether or not it should operate through parliament.<sup>2</sup>

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1 For a discussion of majoritarian and consensus governments, see: Lijphart, A. (1984). *Democracies: patterns of majoritarian and consensus government in twenty-one countries*. Yale University Press.

2 This brief relies on content and media analysis, fieldwork observations, and nine interviews with civil society activists, members of parliament (representing independents, traditional parties and new ones), and individuals representing new political movements. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2023. In addition, the report leverages fieldwork conducted between March 2021 and November 2021 that focused on political participation. The report also benefited from feedback by Nancy Ezzeddine and Erwin van Veen (both Clingendael). My thanks go to all these individuals for their time and effort. The content of the report remains my own responsibility.

In the last five years, different groups and individuals have emerged to challenge the established elite, using various tools and methods. While the process of government formation demands a high degree of consensus,<sup>3</sup> there is greater space for opposition during legislative processes and on matters of accountability.<sup>4</sup> For example, only 50 MPs are required to call an extraordinary parliamentary session to question a member of cabinet. Similarly, only 25 MPs are required to inquire about a policy. The quorum for a legislative session is 50 per cent of members plus one. To legislate requires a simple majority of those present in the session, on the condition that the quorum has been met.

Some opposition groups and individuals have emerged from Iraq's traditional political class and others from civil society and/or the protest movement. This brief takes stock of the various sets of opposition actors and movements that have voiced dissatisfaction with the current Iraqi political system, reconceptualising them as a 'new opposition'. This encompasses activists from the 2019 October Protest Movement (known in Iraq as Tishreen Movement), veteran independent politicians, civil society activists and even former members of established parties. They stand in contrast to the 'old opposition', especially the Islamic Da'wa Party and its affiliates, the Sadrist Movement, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and their various offshoots (including the Badr Organization), and the two dominant Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These were all once united in opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime and today embrace the consensus government model.

These two broad opposition classes may be temporally and ideologically distinct, but so far the 'old opposition' has set the operating conditions for the 'new opposition'. In the basis, an anti-Ba'ath state and anti-Saddam regime mindset continues to dominate the old opposition's outlook. Its resistance against both state and regime, largely fused until 2003, has made it difficult for the old opposition to imagine the possibility of the 'new opposition' being pro-state but against the ruling government. As a result, emerging opposition leaders have

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3 Hamzeh Hadad. (7 January 2022). 'Path to Government Formation in Iraq', Konrad Adenauer Foundation. <https://www.kas.de/en/web/irak/single-title/-/content/path-to-government-formation-in-iraq>.

4 The MPs interviewed for this brief described their responsibilities as representation, legislation and accountability.



had to deal with hostility towards the very concept of opposition and basically reinvent the concept, which has sometimes led to the muddling of parliamentary work with activism or protest action.

The brief is divided into three sections. The first, *Iraq's Collusive Democracy*, outlines the current landscape of Iraqi politics, including a brief overview of the traditional political parties in Iraq, and raises the question: are we really playing musical chairs in the government or are there new people joining? And, if there are new faces, why does it feel as though nothing is changing? Section two, *The New Parliamentarians*, introduces the challengers to the political system who have opted to seek reform from within parliament. How has the experience of being in parliament transformed them? They have famously been unable to unite as an opposition in parliament. Why has this been the case? Section three, *A Scattered Opposition*, examines their counterparts outside the political system, including those activists who boycotted the political process and those who are preparing longer-term participation strategies. Have they developed their opposition capacities since the October 2019 protests? If not, what mechanisms for change and strategies do they now pursue, especially as protests have not recurred at a comparable scale since 2019?

## **Iraq's Collusive Democracy**

Election turnout is one of the clearer measures of the health of a democracy. It indicates citizens' views on the relevance of voting and, by proxy, the functionality as well as legitimacy of the political system and elites that govern them.<sup>5</sup> In Iraq's case, the steadily increasing decline in turnout is a signal of public disenchantment with the system of governance. For the 2021 election, turnout was 44 per cent, according to official figures from the Independent

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5 The issue of how to measure turnout is important because turnout can be a proxy measurement for government legitimacy. In 2021, turnout was measured as the number of actual voters as percentage of the number of registered voters (registration closed weeks ahead of the election). If turnout was measured as the number of actual voters as percentage of the total population eligible to vote, it would be lower. Yet, that number is impossible to calculate in Iraq without an up-to-date census (Iraq last credible census dates from 1957). Some Iraqis believe that the true turnout based on the voting eligible population would be much lower than the official numbers released by IHEC and that this lower turnout reflects the illegitimacy of the government.

High Electoral Commission (IHEC).<sup>6</sup> This is low compared with previous elections (turnout was nearly 80 per cent in December 2005, for example<sup>7</sup>), and compared with elections in neighbouring states (e.g. Turkey, where average turnout is 82.57 per cent<sup>8</sup>). But why are citizens aggrieved and no longer interested in voting?

Many Iraqis believe that voting is a fruitless endeavour because the same faces still dominate the political scene.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, because these 'same faces' are rooted in identity politics, they are living symbols of consociationalism, a system that Iraqis associate with corruption and poor governance. Even if their rhetoric changes to accommodate the changing tone and clamour on the Iraqi street, they are unchanged as individuals. To them, Iraqi elections represent nothing more than a game of musical chairs – or so the thinking goes. Despite this popular narrative, there have been some changes when it comes to the Iraqi political elite, with a few new faces rising to power (e.g. Qais al-Khazali and Mohammad al-Halbusi) and others disappearing from the scene (e.g. Iyad Allawi, the Iraqi Islamic Party).

Most of the key constants, however, remain. First, there is the Islamic Da'wa Party and its orbit, including its offshoots, which has produced most of Iraq's post-2003 prime ministers, including: Ibrahim al-Jafari (2005–2006), Nouri al-Maliki (2006–2014), Haider al-Abadi (2014–2018) and Mohammad al-Sudani (2021–present).<sup>10</sup> Da'wa is practically synonymous electorally with the State of Law Coalition. There are also the Kurdish parties – PUK and KDP – that have remained fixed features in the rule of Iraq. The PUK has, for example, provided Iraq's presidents since 2005: Jalal Talabani (2005–2014), Fuad Masum (2014–2018), Barham Salih (2018–2022) and Latif Rashid (2022–present), while the KDP has usually held the Foreign Ministry: Hoshiyar Zebari (2003–2014) and

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6 'Turnout in Iraq's Election reached 43% - electoral commission', Reuters. 16 October 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turnout-iraqs-election-reached-43-electoral-commission-2021-10-16/>.

7 International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2005). ElectionGuide. <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/1431/>.

8 International Foundation for Electoral Systems. ElectionGuide. <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/218/>.

9 France 24. (28 April 2023). 'Iraq voters fed up with "same old faces"'. <https://www.france24.com/en/20180428-iraq-voters-fed-with-same-old-faces>.

10 The latter was a member from the Da'wa Party Iraq Organization, the local offshoot of Da'wa that remained in Iraq under the Ba'athist regime.

Fuad Hussein (2020–present).<sup>11</sup> There is also the group of politicians and parties linked with ISCI, which has experienced quite a few internal rifts (e.g. the Badr Organization and al-Hakim’s Hikma Movement), but which appears as a cohesive entity to many Iraqis. Offshoots such as the Badr Organization have combined with newer parties that have emerged from the Popular Mobilization Forces to form the Fateh Alliance. Finally, there is the Sadrist Movement, which was present as early as 2003, mostly in the form of the Mahdi Army – an anti-US occupation armed group and a key actor in the sectarian civil war of 2005–2008. Its formal engagement in politics began with the 2010 parliamentary election and it was able to revive the Mahdi Army – this time called the Peace Brigades – during the war against ISIS in 2014.<sup>12</sup> Since then, it has been both a political party and an armed group. This dual structure and the movement’s longevity in politics are perhaps why many Iraqis view the Sadrists as part of the old system, despite attempts to style themselves as anti-establishment revolutionaries.

These political groupings and individuals, in one form or another, have been present since the revival of Iraqi domestic politics since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian regime in 2003. Some individuals rose to prominence later, but – in the popular mindset – are seen as also being part of the political class or political elite because they have joined the existing power-sharing system and consensus governments, looking mostly to increase their share in them. The clearest example is Mohammad al-Halbusi, who was absent from the political scene until 2014 but is nevertheless referred to as a member of the traditional political elite. While Halbusi and his party may be new to the Sunni political scene, having taken on the role of speaker of parliament and that of a leading Sunni politician, he is seen as a continuation of those who came before him. He engages in exchanges that uphold the system, asserting his authority over his constituents and proffering his party’s parliamentary seats for one of the so-called ‘three presidencies’ (the presidency, the premiership and the

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11 Parties do not necessarily have hold the position of minister to have strong influence within a ministry, as they can exert control through special grade positions that include deputy ministers, director generals and advisers to the prime minister. These positions allow political parties to develop a network within a ministry that can counteract, if necessary, officials with different leanings. Many have described it as a parallel institution or a ‘deep state’ within the Iraqi bureaucracy. For example, the Sadrist Movement has had a hold on the Ministry of Health, despite technocratic and members of other parties running the ministry at different times.

12 Mapping Militant Organizations. ‘Mahdi Army’. Stanford University. Last modified May 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/mahdi-army>.

speakership) while providing modest services on a clientelist basis in Anbar and other Sunni areas. He is a new face to an old system.

As a result, a sense of elite collusion makes elections an ineffectual tool for change in Iraq. The idea of elite collusion is not simply a figment of the Iraqi public imagination, but a reality that has become apparent during fieldwork conducted for this brief. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, members of Iraq's leading traditional political parties are on friendly terms, united through financial interests. Often they live and interact in the same social and geographical circles (not only within the Green Zone, but in other compound neighbourhoods throughout Baghdad).

Although many analysts and scholars have been tempted to exceptionalise Iraq's political system, the country suffers from what political scientists describe as 'collusive democracy' or 'promiscuous power sharing'.<sup>13</sup> Promiscuous power sharing is distinguishable from its more benevolent counterpart through a willingness by elites to ignore their constituents' preferences to form opportunistic alliances with other parties. Iraq's case amounts to a cartel in which every significant political party has a share of executive power. For example, ministries are typically divided among the traditional political parties. In a collusive democracy, the mechanisms of accountability fall short because, although citizens can vote individuals in and out of office, they cannot vote them in and out of power. This aligns with the complaint by Iraqis that, no matter how they vote, the same faces prevail in the political arena. For example, even when Muqtada Al-Sadr attempted to challenge the consensus model in 2021, his allies – Halbusi and the KDP – were quick to abandon him in favour of a consensus government. However, Sadr's party remains represented in the executive by remaining political figures, suggesting that the party cartel lives on despite Sadr's formal exit from politics. In brief, the interests of traditional parties in forming a government outweigh their interests in serving their constituents. Collusive democracy is a problem for presidential and parliamentary systems alike. Many Iraqi activists have called for a presidential system,<sup>14</sup> but research

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13 Dan Slater and Erica Simmons define the terms 'promiscuous power sharing', 'collusive democracy', and 'party cartel' in their 2013 article on Bolivia and Indonesia: Slater, D. and E. Simmons. (2013). 'Coping by Colluding'. *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (11): 1366–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453447>.

14 Various author interviews and conversations with Iraqi activists between 2020 and 2023 point to the existence of this demand among a faction of Iraqi activists.

suggests that a presidential system can also run into the problem of promiscuous power sharing.<sup>15</sup>

The main risk of collusive democracy is that it creates the conditions for the very problem it was created to solve – political instability. After all, power-sharing agreements aim to avoid ethnic (or ethno-religious/ethno-sectarian) conflict during a political transition away from authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup> By eroding citizens' faith in democratic institutions, chiefly in elections, collusive democracy raises the chances of revolutionary protest, thus undoing the gains of the political stability it was created to achieve.

An often-suggested solution for Iraq's party cartel politics is that of a parliamentary opposition. Research on post-communist states (transitioning to democracy) has highlighted the importance of 'robust opposition', defined as the presence of 'opposition parties that offer a clear, plausible, and critical governing alternative that threatens the governing coalition with replacement'.<sup>17</sup> This type of opposition – non-existent in Iraq – is critical for countries transitioning from authoritarianism and seeking to avoid state exploitation and corruption. In Iraq, opposition could theoretically take two forms. First, members of the traditional elite could form different coalitions and, second, independents and nascent parties could unite against the party cartel. The first form of opposition has so far proved unsuccessful. When Sadr attempted to set up in opposition after the 2021 elections, the situation devolved into armed confrontation.

There are several hypotheses as to why the traditional political parties and their politicians have not formed a parliamentary opposition. These include protecting their financial interests and the power of the informal political norms designed in the wake of the US invasion. However, in addition to these factors, some MPs – including those from the traditional parties themselves – suggest a lack

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15 Slater, Dan, and Erica Simmons. (2013). *Op. Cit.*

16 Various scholars have discussed the role of power sharing in reducing ethnic conflict and whether it succeeds in serving that role. See: Dan Slater and Erica Simmons. (2013). *Op. Cit.*; Bormann, N.-C., Cederman, L.-E., Gates, S., Graham, B.A. T., Hug, S., Strøm, K. W. & Wucherpfennig, J. (2019). 'Power Sharing: Institutions, Behavior, and Peace'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 63(1), 84–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12407>; Lijphart, Arend. (1999). *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

17 Grzymała-Busse, Anna Maria. (2007). *Rebuilding Leviathan: Party Competition and State Exploitation in Post-Communist Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

of understanding of the notion and practice of opposition. This stems from ‘a fear of marginalisation, the psychology of fear from the former regime’, in which opposition could only be anti-state and risk immediate marginalisation.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the idea of being part of an opposition against the ruling government but in favour of the state is absent in the political vocabulary and imagination.

## The New Parliamentarians

As predicted by the studies of collusive democracy, Iraqis eventually took to the streets to protest the ‘system’ in all its corruption, ineptitude and poor governance in the autumn of 2019.<sup>19</sup> Although the protests started as demands for employment, they soon morphed into the largest protest movement of post-2003 Iraq, uniting various factions of society – including actors as disparate as liberal activists and members of the Sadrist Movement – in a months-long, turbulent call for change.<sup>20</sup> The Shi’a religious establishment in Najaf, the Marjayya, ultimately brokered a settlement between the Iraqi people and the political elite, including the resignation of then Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and the promise of early elections under a revised electoral law.<sup>21</sup>

The promised early elections were held in October 2021, nearly two years after the 2019 protests, during which time Mustafa al-Kadhmi had served as prime minister. He was acceptable to all parties due to his previously held non-partisan role as intelligence chief and his lack of a power base or political party of his own. However, his premiership was not marked by any notable achievements and his failure to prosecute armed actors responsible for killing protestors and activists tarnished his credibility. Torn between his position as interim prime minister and his ambitions, he toyed with creating new political parties (including the short-

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18 Author interview with Member of Parliament Mohammad al-Baldawi. Baghdad 4 April 2023.

19 Dan Slater and Erica Simmons. (2013). ‘Coping by Colluding’. *Op. Cit.*

20 For an overview of the demands of the protest movement, see: Sajad Jiyad, Müjge Küçükkeleş and Tobias Schillings. (2020). ‘Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar’. London: Global Partners Governance. <https://gpgovernance.net/publications/economic-drivers-of-youth-political-discontent-in-iraq-the-voice-of-young-people-in-kurdistan-baghdad-basra-and-thi-qar/>.

21 For an overview of the relationship between protestors and the religious establishment, see: Marsin Alshamary. (April 2022). ‘The protestor paradox: Why do anti-Islamist activists look to clerical leadership?’ Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-protester-paradox-why-do-anti-islamist-activists-look-toward-clerical-leadership/>.

lived Marhala party) to contest the elections, but ultimately relied on internal power plays to try and secure a renewed term in office. His failed attempt to compete on his own terms indicates the difficulty in creating new political forces in Iraq, opposition or otherwise. In order to flourish, they have to strike deals with the existing cartel, which tends to dilute or co-opt them.

Outside of the political elite, various activists organised themselves into political parties to run in the forthcoming elections. The most prominent of these were Emtidad, Nazil Akhith Haqi, the 25 October Movement, the Iraqi House, the National House, The National Awareness Movement, The Grouping of Opposition Forces, The Fao-Zakho Grouping and the National October Grouping. Four of these groups ended up boycotting the election while the others fielded candidates across several governorates. The National House, the Grouping of Opposition Forces, the 25 October Movement and the Iraqi House did not participate in the elections. Emtidad, Nazil Akith Haqi, the National Awareness Movement, the Fao Zakho Grouping and the National October Grouping registered candidates. These parties emerged from the protest movement and have adopted a politically secular outlook, often referred to as 'madani' in Iraq (literally 'civil' but conveying sentiments of nationalism and secularism).<sup>22</sup>

An ideological outlier that also emerged after the October 2019 protests is Eshraquat Kanoon. According to MPs and political activists, it is widely regarded as the religious establishment's parliamentary representation, a new type of Shi'a Islamist party.<sup>23</sup> The current Shi'a Islamist parties have become a reputational burden for the religious establishment. However, there is still a conservative base in south and south-central Iraq that may not be fully aligned with the new, more liberal parties. Eshraquat Kanoon is thus an opportunity to accommodate a religiously conservative base that is dissatisfied with existing Shi'a Islamist parties. In interviews, however, party representatives denied a direct link with the religious establishment. Others, close to the religious establishment, neither denied nor confirmed the association.

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22 For a discussion of what 'madani' means, see: Marsin Alshamary. (7 May 2023). 'In Search of a Madani State in Iraq', *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*. <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2023/05/07/in-search-of-a-madani-state-in-iraq/>.

23 Author interview with Nour Nafa (independent MP, formerly with Emtidad). Baghdad, 28 March 2023.

Of the new parties, only three found their way into parliament: Emtidad with 16 seats, Eshraqat Kanoon with seven seats and the Fao Zakho Grouping with one seat.<sup>24</sup> These numbers were initially lower, but the number of independents and new electoral parties increased after the Sadrist Movement resigned from parliament in mid-June, causing 73 parliamentarians to be replaced.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the New Generation Movement won nine seats. Even though it is a Kurdish political party and was participating in its second federal election, it is considered 'new' because it positions itself against the traditional political elite and emerged in opposition to the traditional parties of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after the elections, it aligned itself with Emtidad, though the alliance lasted only until August 2023.

In addition to the new political parties, 58 independent candidates won a seat in parliament. However, most of them are considered independent only in name and in fact have partisan allegiances.<sup>27</sup> According to research conducted for this brief, the number of non-partisan independents is in the single digits.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in the 2021 election, the title 'independent' was used largely as a ploy by establishment parties to appeal to voters. Some so-called independents joined established parties within hours or days of winning the election. Non-partisan independents faced the usual difficulties in campaigning without the support of political parties: a lack of resources and strong pressure from better-connected candidates. The incentive for political parties to run 'independent' candidates will decrease with the new electoral law, which brings back governorate-wide districts.

Once these new political parties and non-partisan independents made their way to parliament, they were confronted with several obstacles, including attempted

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24 According to official data from the Iraqi Council of Representatives: <https://iq.parliament.iq/ابواب/البرلمان/>.

25 For an overview of the situation after Sadrist withdrawal, see: Hamzeh Hadad. (25 July 2022). 'Deadlocked and loaded: Iraq's political inertia'. The European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/article/deadlocked-and-loaded-iraqs-political-inertia/>.

26 Seat numbers reflect the total number of seats after the resignation of 73 Sadrists, which allowed Emtidad in particular to grow in size.

27 For example, Muhsin Al-Mandalawi is the first representative in parliament but is widely considered to work for the Coordination Framework.

28 For more information about these independents, see: Marsin Alshamary. (January 2022). 'Iraqi Elections 2021: Independents and New Political Parties'. Konrad-Adenauer Foundation, Beirut. <https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/0/Marsin+Alshamary+-+Iraqi+Elections+2021+Independents+and+New+Political+Parties.pdf/52c013da-0c90-161d-51f5-632e79ca7984?version=1.0&t=1642142693879>.



co-optation, bureaucratic hurdles and a general lack of experience in operating within parliament, including its committees and working with parliamentary staff. Some adopted a pragmatic approach, including a willingness to compromise with traditional party candidates, while others have been overcome by powerlessness and have even voiced a desire to boycott future elections.

### Box 1 The Parliament Building: An Inhospitable Environment for an Opposition to Grow

The Council of Representatives is housed in the [Baghdad Conference Palace](#), which was built in 1982 – alongside Baghdad International Airport and Baghdad’s famous hotels: Rashid, Babylon, Ishtar and Palestine – for the Non-Aligned Movement summit. However, due to the Iran-Iraq War, the summit was hosted the following year in India. Four decades later, the complex is the site of Iraq’s nascent democracy.

As is apparent to any visitor, the building’s multiple auditoriums were not meant to house a parliament with two opposing sides, but rather to hold an audience. This physical setting fits the consensus government model set up by the US, which is upheld by Iraq’s established parties. All ethno-religious groups are represented, but there is no visible way of separating government from opposition through the seating arrangement. For example, there is no aisle dividing two sides: government and opposition.



The meeting rooms in the Baghdad Conference Palace have been transformed into political party offices. This is to be expected, but even the distribution of the political parties' offices is done on an ethno-sectarian basis – for Shi'a, Sunnis and Kurds – creating another physical challenge for new political parties and independents. Having run a campaign based on overlooking ethno-religious identity, where do they set up shop? Where do they sit in the legislative assembly? The current parliament set-up is telling: the office of Emtidad – the largest of the protest-based parties – used to be the office for the deputy speaker of parliament (the sign is still on the door, see photo above). Meanwhile, the sign on Ishraqat Kanoon's office reads 'Ishraqat Kanoon and the Independents', but the room is clearly set up for Ishraqat Kanoon.

Immediately upon assuming office, the cohort of new parliamentarians faced co-optation attempts from various traditional parties. In interviews, two candidates from southern Iraq described being offered monetary incentives to win them and their various colleagues over to specific camps.<sup>29</sup> One MP claimed that some new MPs were offered a monthly stipend to support traditional parties. And another claimed they were offered a one-off payment and a gift of several SUVs to change their political allegiance. Such co-optation attempts continued well into their term in parliament and created an environment of mistrust and skepticism among the new parliamentarians. Speculation about who has been 'bought' continue to float around, unsubstantiated but nevertheless crippling.

The opposition parties have not formed a meaningful opposition alliance and some, like Emtidad, have been haemorrhaging members. Members who have jumped ship complain about the internal structure of the party as well as the 'idealism' and 'lack of pragmatism' of its leader, Alaa al-Rikabi.<sup>30</sup> Al-Rikabi is also said to make decisions unilaterally, making the party structure appear uninvitingly like the traditional parties and alienating some younger members. Similarly, in early 2022, there was a wave of party resignations (among non-parliamentarian members also) as a result of al-Rikabi and a handful of others voting for Muhammad al-Halbusi as speaker of parliament, which many felt

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29 Author interview with various anonymised MPs. Baghdad, March–April 2023.

30 Author interview with Nour Nafa (independent MP, formerly with Emtidad). Baghdad, 28 March 2023.

was antithetical to the party's principles.<sup>31</sup> Tensions peaked in June 2022, when the party dismissed Alaa al-Rikabi as the party's secretary general after he accused some members of corruption, causing five MPs to resign.<sup>32</sup> In brief, the party's diverse membership, its insufficient vetting of candidates and particular leadership style made it difficult for it to get started in parliament.

As Emtidad and others grapple with internal party dynamics, there is also a lack of overall unity among the non-traditional parties and non-partisan candidates. Sirwa Abdulwahid, head of the New Generation Movement's parliamentary bloc, is optimistic that this will change and that a parliamentary opposition will form with the next election cycle.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, she worries that there is little coordination or discipline among the opposition parties, saying that 'when we agree to something [as a party], we all have to stick to it. Emtidad lacks this.'<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the best example of such a lack of coordination among the opposition was its response to the electoral law amendment. In the early hours of 27 March 2023, parliament held a session to vote on amendments to the electoral law that would undo the changes the protest movement had helped to bring about. Many new parties and independents opposed the amendments but neither managed to gather enough votes to prevent its passing nor to prevent a quorum from being reached. A group of MPs subsequently resorted to protesting in parliament, but were forcibly removed by security forces by order of the speaker of parliament.

## Box 2 Does the Electoral Law Matter?

Iraq's electoral law has evolved since the country's first election in 2005, when the whole country was under one electoral district. It was later split into 18 districts based on the governorates. In the 2010 elections, voters could choose individual candidates from an open list.

31 Al Jazeera Arabic, "قارعة اليا في نيح ححم ال بزح ب فصعت تالاق ستا ة حوم". (February 2022). <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2022/2/9/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B5%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A>.

32 Almada Paper, "ة كرح ال ة سائر نم يب كرك ال ءالغ ة لاقا نلعت دادتم". (June 2022). <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=266629>.

33 Author interview with Sirwa Abdulwahid, Baghdad, 13 April 2023.

34 Author interview with Sirwa Abdulwahid, Baghdad, 13 April 2023.

The most recent election saw further changes, such as the breaking down of the governorates into 83 electoral districts and the use of single non-transferable votes (SNTV) rather than voting from a list of candidates. Electoral reform had been a major demand from the protest squares across Baghdad and the south. This demand was also supported in the Friday sermons of one of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's representatives. The 2021 federal elections saw a wave of new independents win seats, including some who are non-partisan. Parties from the October Protest Movement that boycotted the 2021 elections regretted not participating and foregoing the chance to enter the political system. The reversal of the electoral law for the next elections means that parties will have to recalibrate how to run their campaigns and who they will form a coalition with, as candidates will depend on their list members to bring in more votes.

For parties like the New Generation movement from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the change in electoral law could be favourable. In 2021, despite smaller districts with SNTV, the New Generation movement ran a broad campaign framing their party as a direct challenge to establishment parties with every candidate being a face for change. This won the New Generation Party the second most seats in Sulaymaniyah governorate. Given the number of votes it received the party could have won more seats, but it ran a tactical campaign with only one candidate per district to avoid candidates cancelling each other out in the face of other parties. With the return to the older system of larger electoral units and cascading votes, the New Generation movement no longer has to worry about how many candidates it nominates.<sup>35</sup> Sirwa Abdulwahid was not at all rattled by the changes to the electoral law, saying that '... New Generation is big enough not to mind the new law. We believe the new parties can benefit

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35 For example, in District 5 of Sulaymaniyah, the New Generation Movement candidate won a seat with 21,587 votes, the most votes overall. However, the PUK's Kurdistan Coalition won two of the four seats in that district with candidates winning 7,851 and 7,504 votes each. Overall, the Kurdistan Coalition had 25,707 votes with four candidates winning two seats, while New Generation Movement won one seat with its one candidate winning 21,587 votes. In district 2, the Kurdistan Coalition won two seats with 26,545 votes, split between the two winners – 14,780 and 11,765, meanwhile the New Generation Movement won one seat with their sole candidate winning 25,022 votes.

from this as it's easier to market. We care about the integrity of the election more than the system.<sup>36</sup>

A similar argument has been used for Emtidad, whose numbers in Thi Qar could have won it more seats under the new electoral system.<sup>37</sup> While that may be true, when it is time to vote again, the party's popularity will be affected by its recent performance in parliament.<sup>38</sup> It could lose seats, especially if the October Protest Movement-based parties run separate lists and they cancel one another out.

Smaller parties need to be careful when entering electoral lists with other parties, especially if those parties are larger. The Iraqi Communist Party made a resurgence after the 2015 protests and entered into an electoral coalition with the Sadrist Movement under the name Sairoon in the 2018 elections. Despite together winning 54 seats, only two went to the Communist Party. Gorran had a similar experience when, despite having split with the party, it decided to enter the 2021 elections with the PUK to challenge the KDP. While the Gorran-PUK alliance won 17 seats, all the candidates were from the PUK.

For individual candidates (rather than parties), the new electoral law makes campaigning more difficult. Candidates who only had to campaign in their own district will now have to campaign across their governorate. This will be difficult or impossible for many, for financial, logistical and safety reasons. For some women candidates emerging from the protest movement, the smaller districts made it easier and safer because they were campaigning in their own neighbourhoods and communities. On the other hand, as Ala Talabani – a prominent female politician – pointed out, larger districts allow women to gather the votes of their ideological supporters who tend to be geographically dispersed.<sup>39</sup> Another

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36 Author interview with Sirwa Abdulwahid. Baghdad, 13 April 2023.

37 Emtidad received the most votes in Thi Qar, with 152,761 votes for its six candidates, five of whom won a seat. Meanwhile, the Sadrist Movement won the most seats (nine), with only 75,645 votes. Emtidad, like the New Generation Movement, for the most part ran only one candidate per district or at the most no more than two.

38 Author interview with Mohammad Annouz. Baghdad, 3 April 2023.

39 Ala Talabani was a speaker at an event held in Baghdad by the Iraq Future Center on 16 December 2022: 'The Role of Political and Civil Awareness in Improving Democracy in Iraq'.

disadvantage of the new electoral law is that, once again, citizens will not know who represents them. For example, there are 69 seats for Baghdad, an incredibly diverse governorate. If it is not clear who represents which areas or who is responsible for what, this erodes one of the main duties of an MP: to represent.

What is certain is that the decision to revise the electoral law was spearheaded by establishment parties that are more comfortable campaigning within the old system, believing it gives them a better chance at keeping out newer and smaller parties and independents. The Sadrist Movement, which won significantly more seats in 2021 with fewer votes than in 2018, prefers the SNTV system with smaller districts. However, it did not protest against the change as strongly as some expected as it has been able to win elections under both systems.

## A Scattered Opposition

Many of the new political parties born out of the October Protest Movement did not participate in the 2021 elections, either because of their ideological boycott or for logistical reasons. After witnessing Emtidad's success, their interest in participation grew but today they are disincentivised by the change in electoral law and grappling with decisions on whether to participate in the forthcoming provincial council elections, scheduled for late 2023.

There have been attempts to gather these parties into a cohesive platform. In October 2022 at the Baghdad International Fair, eight parties – including ones from Tishreen like the National House and the Iraqi House – and more traditional anti-establishment parties – like the Iraqi Communist Party – came together to organise the Democratic Forces for Change (DFC).<sup>40</sup> The DFC hopes to be a vehicle for opposition, unity and change.<sup>41</sup> Some other political gatherings and parties have not yet put themselves in the political arena. These include the

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40 Ashleigh Whelan. (26 October 2022). 'Long-Awaited Coalition of Civic Minds: Democratic Forces of Change'. *Fikra Forum*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/long-awaited-coalition-civic-minds-democratic-forces-change>.

41 Mohamed Albasiem. (6 February 2023). 'Democratic Forces of Change: A new vision for Iraqi politics?'. *The New Arab*. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/democratic-forces-change-alternative-iraqi-politics>.

National Awakening Movement, which insists on steady internal growth and development before running for office, and Amarji, a political party that has also adopted a measured approach to party growth and participation.

These parties represent the various sources of political renewal in Iraq. Some arose out of the protest squares with mobilisation capacity but little political experience. Others emerged from civil society and have both mobilisation and advocacy experience, which is valuable in political life. Yet others emerged from the traditional political parties but challenge their monopoly and aim to be more responsive to the needs of the Iraqi people. Amarji, for example, defines itself as madani (civil), but conservative. Its founder has experience in traditional parties and is connected to Iraq's traditional political elite, an asset many other new parties lack. Proximity to the traditional elite – though not necessarily on an ideological basis – confers a certain degree of protection to a party. What is most interesting about Amarji's plans is that it has calculated the potential of getting non-voters to vote and the impact this could have on the Iraqi political scene. This identification of the untapped potential of the Iraqi electorate is a new development, and a promising one. Its strength is that it challenges the primacy of existing parties by highlighting how small, in absolute terms, their bases are in comparison to the overall Iraqi population. Enlarging the political pie may provide a route to creating a strong parliamentary opposition.

# Conclusion

The fragmented state of the ‘new opposition’ does not yet represent a threat to Iraq’s establishment parties. For now, it is easier to tolerate new political parties because they do not have the voter base to challenge the power base of established parties. But the question remains: what happens if the established parties are truly defeated or challenged at the ballot box? It is uncertain what tipping point will draw them out in full force. If that moment arrives, what political instruments will they resort to? Established parties may first institute practices that protect them, like the amendment to the electoral law. They also have access to various tools, including the courts and the media. Finally, the real elephant in the room is how armed force might be used by political actors that have it at their disposal – the repression of the Tishreen 2019 protests serving as an ominous warning. The next brief in this series will explore these matters in greater detail.

Meanwhile, new political parties will have to be better organised among themselves to work towards a parliamentary opposition. This requires a common theme and unified vision. One possible point of anchorage is their joint dislike of traditional parties and the consociational system. Foreign parties may be tempted to intervene in support of protest-based parties or compelling independent candidates, but that will undermine them reputationally and provide ammunition to opponents looking to discredit them. At worst, it can be seen as electoral meddling. Foreign parties can instead continue to support civil society initiatives that promote an equal electoral playing field through freedom of speech and assembly. Foreign parties can also continue to play a role in electoral observation and provide technical assistance to the electoral commission.

A parliamentary opposition can emerge in Iraq if several conditions are met: first, if there is a permissive pre-electoral environment; second, if independent candidates and new political parties can unite, or work together in a tighter and more disciplined manner; and finally, if the Iraqi electorate increases its participation. The first condition is critical as a dangerous and inhospitable environment will dissuade reformists from participating in elections. It will require the joint efforts of Iraq’s civil society, international actors (such as the UN), and reform-minded Iraqi officials to prevent the dissolution of rights and liberties. The second condition can be met with time, as Iraq’s new parties and



MPs acclimatise to the political environment and forge relationships. In some instances, this process has already begun and is visible in occasional joint initiatives, even though it falls short of the level required. Finally, there are more non-voters than voters in Iraq and if those non-voters can be persuaded to turn out in favour of new political parties and independent candidates, winning a sizable number of parliamentary seats – even a majority – is possible.