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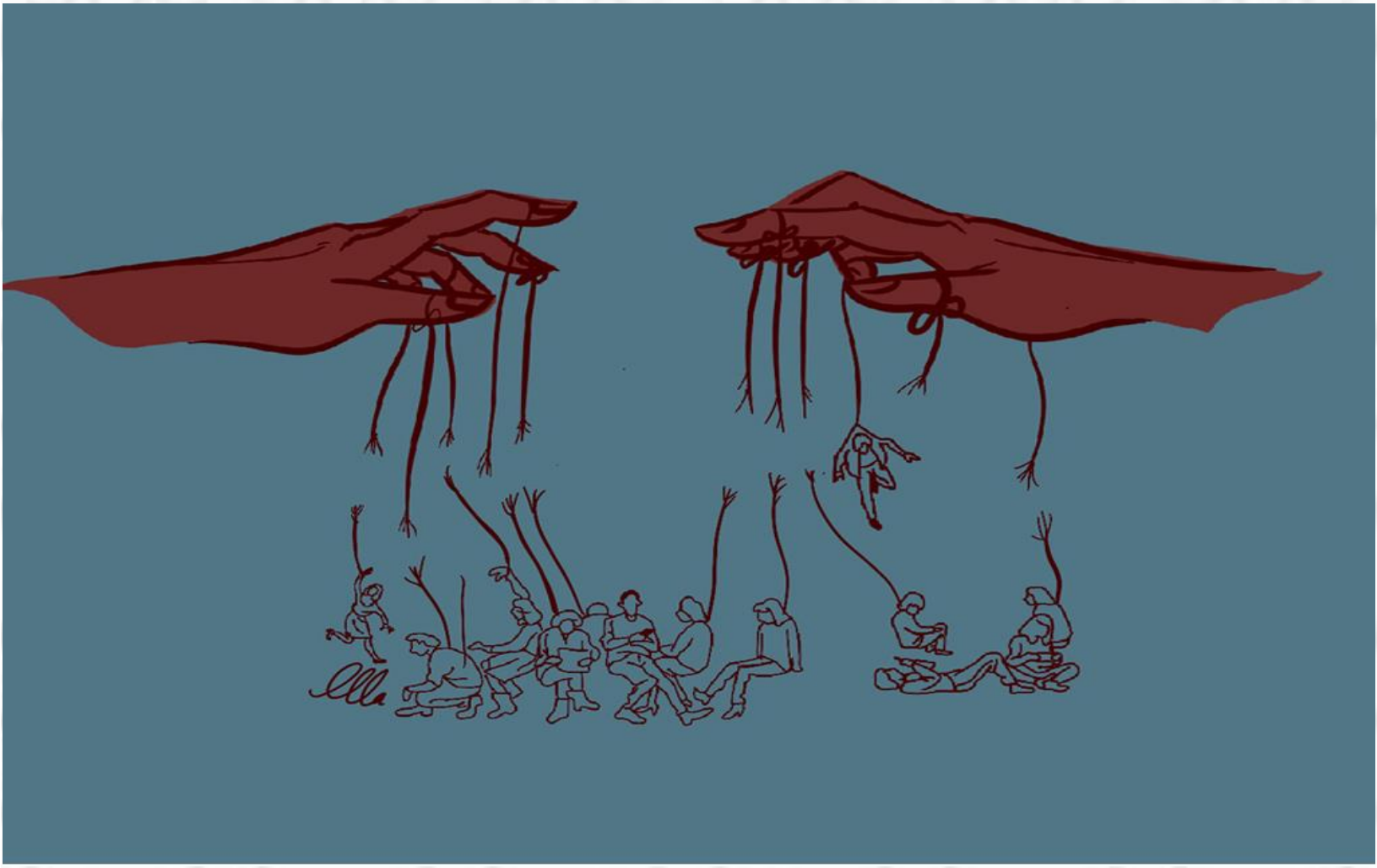
Is Iraqi society depoliticised?



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This reflection is drawn upon academic literature, observations and interviews conducted in Baghdad with political parties, activists, members of the civil society and journalists. It has no ambition to pretend itself empirically exhaustive, especially for two reasons. First, interviewees were only based in Baghdad; second, this paper does not integrate elements dealing with tribalism, though tribes are an important component of Iraqi modern society while reflecting on politics.

Introduction

In October 2021, Iraq has known its lowest ever election turnout since 2003: around 41%. This could be seen as a paradox, given the great mobilisations that occurred two years ago. But the reality, as this paper will argue, is likely to lie in the general fatigue that has permeated the Iraqi society towards politics. Thus, it is proposed here to analyse the process of "depoliticisation" while trying to explain what underpins it. To this end, one must be very careful with this concept. To avoid any confusion, *depoliticisation* will not refer to the political affiliation – i.e., this reflection will not call "depoliticised" a citizen or an idea for not being affiliated to a political party. Rather, it will revolve around the conditions of the capacity to choose. Simply put, every aspect of social existence that requires a collective decision can be considered as "political"[1]; hence, every aspect of social existence has the capacity to be "depoliticised." This paper will then understand depoliticisation as the fact to 'remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and

[1] 'Aristotle's famous quote – 'Man is by nature a political animal' – implies two assertions: man can only live in society; and his individual willingness is subject to social laws. **This paper written for Rewaq BAGHDAD CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

deliberation' from a given population.[2] Following this definition, a citizen is therefore depoliticised when he loses his *potential for choice*, whether he is conscious of this loss or not.

First, the paper begins defining the concept of depoliticisation – of the political field – and argues that this process implies de facto a depoliticisation of the society. Concerning Iraq, this process started with an authoritative and formal step before moving to an implicit and symbolic one – notably supported by the *symbolic power*. Second, to control this symbolic power, the reflection underlines the essential role that sectarianisation has played over citizenship. To serve their interests, political parties have indeed resorted to sectarian identities which, precisely, resonate with Iraqi citizens. Third, the paper discusses whether sectarian dynamics are still the main driver of depoliticisation or not. It appears that corruption has played a significant role in shaping a sort of a "no exit" situation that entails a general fatigue within the population towards politics. Finally, some lessons are drawn from the elections of October 2021. They indicate a fragile trend of repoliticisation of the

[2] Paul Fawcett, Matthew Flinders, Colin Hay, and Matthew Wood. "Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance." In *Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 4. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198748977.003.0001. **This paper written for Rewaq BAGHDAD CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

Iraqi political field and society. However, this trend faces strong opposing forces that still possess the symbolic power, and still sustain the conditions for corruption. This unbalanced struggle strengthens the impression of helplessness within Iraqi society.

Depoliticisation and 'symbolic power'

The concept of depoliticisation is useful to grasp the nature of what has constituted the political field of Iraq since 2003. By political field, this paper will understand the space in which occurs the competition about how to govern society. This space must involve any political actors – whether they are political parties, social movements, activists, journalists… – that may express a political opinion and act accordingly. Then, everything that constitutes this political field has the potentiality to be depoliticised. Depoliticisation comes when the *potential for choice is removed or displaced*, namely when a citizen loses his agency due to the lack or the flawed nature of the "options on the table." It can occur when unpolitical values – such as blood or creed – become integral parts of deliberations within the political field. In

other words, the political field is depoliticised when it no longer proposes unbiased political options, or when a single vision dominates it. In that respect, this paper argues that a depoliticised political field makes society lose its agency; society thus becomes depoliticised. Indeed, if the political field is politically void, then the society loses de facto its potential for choice. To take one example, a political issue, such as what constitutes citizenship, is arguably depoliticised when critics have become impossible or when the political debate has been cheated. This can be done authoritatively – if the political elite officially imposes a single vision of citizenship – , or implicitly, through social construct – if it has been unconsciously admitted that only a part of the population meets the "criteria" of the so-called citizenship. In Iraq, the authoritative way may have constituted the first step of depoliticisation, while the implicit way would have been the second one. This paper will mostly focus on the latter: the implicit depoliticisation.

For a ruling elite that wishes to depoliticise the political field – and consequently the political stakes of its country–, the objective is to shape this political field in a single way that serves the elite's interests, without credible contestation. In Iraq, the *Muhasasa* system, implemented in 2003 to organise the political field along

sectarian lines, created the conditions to shape this political field in an exclusionary manner. It constituted the first step of depoliticisation: authoritative and official. As Carl Schmitt advanced, 'only a strong state can depoliticise, only a strong state can openly and effectively decree that certain activities remain its privilege.'[3] Here, the elite privilege lies in shaping the political field not with 'an institutionalised state' but with a 'struggle between different groups for domination' that share the power and the resources of the country.[4] For instance, around 300,000 "ghost workers" are granted with a salary without working – a relevant indicator of the resource allocation.[5] Therefore, sectarianism – on which is based the system, defined later – has become 'a political tool with which to delegitimise political opposition and stigmatise difference and nonconformity.'[6] The *Muhasasa* system allowed the ruling elite to simplify the political field and to render it easily readable while casting individuals into fixed identities. This "readability" contributed to *remove the potential for choice* of the society. Indeed, 'voting preferences and the electoral process

[3] Carl Schmitt, "Sound Economy – Strong State," In R. Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998): 226-227.
[4] Toby Dodge, "The contradictions of systemic sectarianism in Iraq," in "Sectarianism in the Longue Durée," *SEPAD*, 2019: 20.
[5] Ali Allawi, cited in "Over 10% of Public Servants in Iraq are 'Ghost Employees': Government," *Basnews*, February 2021. https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/667538.
[6] Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Identity and National Identity in the Middle East," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1: 125.

[have been] underpinned by ethnic and religious identity.'[7] The *Muhasasa* system led to the mobilisation of 'unpolitical values' such as blood, family, and creed; values that have paved the way to a flawed political debate.[8]

The second step of depoliticisation has been mostly processed through the symbolic power. By definition, and as Bourdieu explains, the symbolic power is a power as long as it is not acknowledged as such.[9] The main characteristic of the symbolic power is therefore its implicitness. Paraphrasing Bourdieu, Dodge and Mansour argued that the 'symbolic capital, [which is] the power to define common sense and impose a *nomos*, or principle vision of how society is structured, is the most valuable resource in the competition to dominate a country's political field and hence shape the way its population perceives of their world.'[10] Likewise, the discourse analysis of Nassima Neggaz is very helpful to understand how grand

[7] Ranj Alaaldin, "Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq's Future," *Brookings*, 2018: 1.
[8] Billie Jeanne Brownlee & Maziyar Ghiabi, "The Mythological Machine in the Great Civil War (2001–2021): Oikos and Polis in Nation-Making," *Middle East Critique*, 30:2, 138.
[9] Pierre Bourdieu, « Sur le pouvoir symbolique. Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, » 32(3) : 410.
[10] Toby Dodge & Renad Mansour, "Sectarianization and De-sectarianization in the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18:1, (2020): 60.

narratives about divisions between Shi'as and Sunnis, for instance, are used to construct artificial identities and perceptions within the society.[11]

Indeed, to depoliticise the political debate, to *remove the potential for choice,* the ultimate weapon is to shape what the population perceives and to make it unaware of its perception's distortion. This has often consisted in justifying the system while pretending to maintain the order. For example, a strategy of reigning over the symbolic power in the media was used to undermine the 2019 protests: the Shi'a militia leaders, Hadi al-Amiri and Qaais al-Khzaali, accused on TV shows the demonstrators of being commanded by the United States and Israel.[12] They did so to improve their symbolic power and dominate the political field, placing themselves as the defenders of the national integrity. Eventually, the competition within the political field consists of imposing a single vision of what Iraq should be and with which citizenship's criteria. Another example is telling: when some parties boycotted the 2021 elections, they obviously did it to reject the system and to send political messages.[13] However, is it not what the ruling elite wished in order to

[11] Nassima Neggaz, "Sectarianization and Memory in the post- Saddam Middle East: the 'Alāqima," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (2020). DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2020.1772041
[12] Dodge & Mansour, "Sectarianization and De-sectarianization": 66.
[13] Interview with a member of a party which decided to boycott the elections of October 2021.

corner the political debate? The question is open, but it is interesting to notice that the boycott, in some ways, strengthens the depoliticisation of Iraqi politics – because all the options were not on the table.

Sectarianisation and its consequences on citizenship

Before analysing the tools of depoliticisation, it is necessary to define in more depth what this paper understands by sectarianism – a widely-used term when reflecting on Middle East divided societies. As some scholars have shown, the term sectarianism is a process, a 'product of thought' that has no 'material existence.'[14] From now on, to avoid the static connotation of the monochrome term "sectarianism," this paper will favour the term "sectarianisation" when referring to its processual nature. Sectarianisation, as an underlying process, has oriented the debate more to *who belongs to the nation* than to *how to govern it*.[15] This process, as Dodge argues, 'sees politicians or sectarian entrepreneurs, seeking to impose religious difference 'as the primary marker of modern political identity.''[16,17] This is

[14] Haddad, "Sectarian Identity": 125; Fields, K. E., & Fields, B. J., *Racecraft: The soul of inequality in American life.* (London: Verso, 2014): 22-23; see also Usama Makdisi, "Moving Beyond Orientalist Fantasy, Sectarian Polemic, and Nationalist Denial," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40:4 (2008).
[15] Brownlee & Ghiabi, "The Mythological Machine": 138.
[16] Toby Dodge, "Introduction: Between Wataniyya and Ta'ifia; understanding the relationship between state-based nationalism and sectarian identity in the Middle East," *Nations and Nationalism*, 26 (2020): 86. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12580.
[17] Usama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism; Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000): 7.

why sectarianisation could be seen as the major depoliticisation's tool of the Iraqi political field. The identity of Iraqis becomes then an heterogenous space of struggle where the symbolic power is the monopoly of the political parties. Indeed, drawn upon the *Muhasasa* system, the constitution of 2005 reified the sectarianisation process and, as such, have been considered by some as a 'sectarian artefact […] dividing citizenship.'[18]

Thus, how has this symbolic power been used to divide citizenship? How has this second step of depoliticisation proceeded? A divided citizenship implies an imbalance between citizens, a difference of nature towards the rights each citizen should be granted with. Indeed, as seen above, if unpolitical values such as greed or blood prevail in the political field, how can equal citizenship be reached? The Iraqi political field is dominated by parties that are primarily defined according to their ethno-sectarian affiliation: the *Fatah Alliance* will be portrayed as a Shi'a party, *Taqaddum* as a Sunni one, etc. Then, one could argue that Iraqi citizens are necessarily – whether strongly or not – influenced by their own intimate and ethno-religious identity. Sectarian identities deployed by political parties resonate with

[18] Brownlee & Ghiabi, "The Mythological Machine": 129. **This paper written for Rewaq BAGHDAD CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

Iraqi citizens.[19] They talk to their hearts and minds and bring a sense of belonging.[20] Then, the political debate may lose its significance when political and civic values are overshadowed. That is why, a politician told the author, 'labelling political party as Shi'a, Sunni, or whatever, is not good: it hampers citizenship.'[21] Some even argued that Iraqis have witnessed 'the depoliticisation of citizenship' since 2003, although the official purpose of the elite at that time – with the Americans – was to create a representative political field.[22] Conscious of their symbolic power, political parties have sustained these sectarian dynamics ever since, whether through discourses, appointments in the civil service, or any other actions they undertake.

However, this symbolic power is losing force with the rise of new generations, as they seem to uncover the implicit mechanisms that sectarian political parties resort to. Indeed, the *Tishreen* movement of October 2019, unprecedented protests since 2003, precisely raised against sectarian governance and systemic corruption. The widespread slogan 'we want a homeland' [*nreed watan*] encapsulated the

[19] Simon Mabon, "Sectarian Games in the Longue Durée," in "Sectarianism in the Longue Durée," *SEPAD*, 2019: 3.
[20] Except the young generation, interviews conducted for this paper have shown a clear tendency of sectarian-driven votes. A Shi'a citizen in Baghdad would be more inclined to vote for a Shi'a candidate and *vice versa*. It could be interesting to quantify this propension of sectarian-driven vote across the country.
[21] Interview with a member of a traditional party.
[22] Brownlee & Ghiabi, "The Mythological Machine": 138.

fundamental claims of this youth-led movement.[23] The young adults interrogated by the author asserted that they do not care about sectarian identities, whereas an equal citizenship makes sense. They are aware of the differences that separate them from the previous generations: 'this gap between us and our parents or grand-parents is widespread in Iraq, not only in Baghdad; and this is not only a political gap, but also a societal and cultural one.'[24] Regarding the very trivial concept of friendship, all young interviewees claim to have friends of different ethno-religious affiliation, especially the young that took the streets in 2019. That being said, this movement of *repoliticisation* has proved to be short-lived. At least 600 people were killed, thousand injured, and many activists have fled Baghdad – most of the time to Erbil. For instance, an activist met for the sake of this paper came back to the capital but is still hiding and moving on a daily basis. The 2003-reshaped political field has certainly been challenged by social movements, but its dominating forces – coercive and symbolic – seem too deeply rooted in it to be overturned.

[23] Marsin Alshamary, "Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq: Between Reform and Revolution," *Institute of Regional and International Studies* (IRIS), December 2020: 2.
[24] Interview with two young Shi'i women who did not consider the sectarian affiliation of the candidate they voted for. Conversely, their parents will 'systematically vote for a Shi'a candidate' – the level of qualification or the competencies would be overlooked.

So far, the paper unveiled two relational and intertwined mechanisms, sectarianisation and symbolic power, that have contributed to depoliticise the Iraqi political field, and thereby the Iraqi society. Relational and intertwined because, as seen above, the symbolic power, which constituted mostly the second step of depoliticisation, has been fundamentally driven by sectarianisation. Thus, these two mechanisms have prevented the emergence of an equal citizenship which, besides, revealed a gap between the young generations and their elders. Above all, sectarianisation and symbolic power seem to have played a significant role in the generalised state corruption which, within the population, carries a sentiment of being stuck in a "no exit" situation. The fatigue that emerged from this situation sustains the depoliticisation of the society.

A "no exit" situation fuelled by corruption and sectarian dynamics

What is striking while being in Iraq is the impression of consensus that surrounds the corruption of the Iraqi state. All the interviewees – from a very diverse background – agreed on an assertion: corruption has permeated the Iraqi state. Such a consensus gives the impression that corruption exists but that no one is

concerned, or that it is elusive, or too blurred to cover a reality. Actually, corruption has a material existence and is embodied by the system of "special grades" [*al-darajat al-khasa*]. Some interviewees see it as the major problem of Iraq.[25] With this system, political parties seek to appoint their loyalists to senior civil servant positions. A recent and outstanding account has been drawn to demonstrate how rooted in the state this system is, and how powerful – regarding their decision-making power – these loyal senior civil servants are.[26] Even Mohamed al-Halbousi, the current speaker of the parliament, declared at Chatham House in 2019 that *wikala* – a "special grades solution" created by Maliki to appoint, on his own, temporary contracts in the civil service – was a critical problem.[27] Those "loyalist parties," that consequently shape the political field, guarantee thereby the survival of the 2003-elite pact – which created the *Muhasasa* system. In fact, ministers are technocrats and senior civil servants are politicians affiliated to a party. But, in a democratic state, the inverse shouldn't be the logic? Thus, one can argue that loyalist parties circumvent the population's claims and deprive Iraqi citizens of a true political choice and collective agency.

[25] Both an Iraqi researcher and an Iraqi journalist answered *yes* to the question: "are special grades the major problem of Iraq?"
[26] Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, "Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq," *Chatham House*, June 2021.
[27] Ibid: 23.

If corruption is the main obstacle to a flawless political field and a genuine democracy, the question of whether sectarianisation and symbolic power are still significant drivers of depoliticisation in 2021 is yet be answered. Given that most political parties have been built upon sectarian lines instead of political ideas, and given that they are still part of the political field, it is worth considering this question. In other words, to understand the depoliticisation of Iraqi society, can we separate corruption from the sectarianisation process? To simplify the argumentation, this paper refers to loyalist parties and sectarian ones as a single reality.

Fanar Haddad, a specialist of sectarian issues in Iraq, would probably answer yes to the above question. To him, sectarian dynamics 'no longer act as the chief drivers of political violence, instability, or political competition.'[28] He also rightly considers that a sectarian party and a secular one can equally be corrupted. Nevertheless, if one makes the hypothesis that political violence and instability are inherent to society's depoliticisation, then two reasons might mitigate Haddad's argument.[29] First, and this is where the symbolic power is still relevant, a sectarian

[28] Fanar Haddad, "The waning relevance of the Sunni-Shia divide," *The Century Foundation*, 2019.
[29] Following the sociologist Juan José Linz and his work on authoritarian regimes and democratisation, this paper takes the stance that Haddad's 'political violence, instability and political competition' are inherent to the depoliticisation of society. But this hypothesis would deserve to be further examined and debated.

party arguably possesses a greater ability to create grand narratives than a secular one. This is due to its natural propension to focus on ethno-religious identity and to connect it to history, a process that is directly targeting hearts and minds of the population. It allows indeed a greater feeling of belonging. A secular party, conversely, does not utilise identity to design its political line. Therefore, sectarian parties' ability to resonate within the population, while referring to grand narratives, may continue to be a source of instability and political violence while removing *the potential for choice* from citizens.

Second, as an observer of Iraqi politics told the author, sectarian parties still exist and will continue to do so.[30] Indeed, if we take the first five parties – except the Sadr Movement, discussed below –, it is hard to deny their ethno-sectarian nature, either in terms of electoral base, history, or perceived identity.[31] Sectarianisation has been the matrix of those parties and, thereby, it is a mistake to believe that they will be completely secularised one day. Only new parties, such as the ones born from *Tishreen*, could be built upon a secular basis. All in all, Haddad

[30] Interview with the director of a think tank.
[31] In the order of received seats in 2021's elections: *Taqadum* is depicted as a Sunni party; the Maliki's *State of Law Coalition* as a Shi'a; the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* as a Kurd; the *Fatah Alliance* as a Shi'a; the *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* as a Kurd.

undoubtedly raises an important point contending that corruption can live without sectarian dynamics. But it seems also relevant to underline that these dynamics, though wisely no longer considered as the chief driver of instability, still contribute to depoliticise the political field and society.

Lessons from October 2021: towards a repoliticisation of Iraqi society?

Having this argument in mind, what lessons can be drawn from the elections of October? Imtidad's nine seats win is telling for some reasons. This party may exemplify a new way of doing politics and, consequently, it arguably contributes to repoliticise society while departing from sectarianisation and corruption. Indeed, Imtidad did not have the capacity to promise money and jobs to their voters, or to 'use religious or ethnic sentiments for mobilization.'[32] Furthermore, this party recommends decentralisation from Baghdad which, as many scholars argue, is also a necessary condition for a truly effective and secular governance.[33] Nonetheless,

[32] Omar Al-Nidawi, "While Iraq's next government may be 'business as usual,' the election has planted the seeds for change," *Middle East Institute*, November 2021.
[33] Alaaldin, "Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq's Future": 29.

the boycott of the elections, mainly led by young people from *Tishreen*, still acts as a brake on repoliticisation – though this boycott, in itself, is a strong political message. And with only nine seats out of 329 – besides few other independent parties –, the perspective to change the (*Muhasasa*) system is de facto postponed.

Concerning the victory of the Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, it is all but easy to bring certainties to light. Since the rise of the Sadr Movement after the US invasion, its leader has been changing positions many times. For instance, he is advocating loud and clear for a secular Iraq but, at the same time, he seems convinced that Shi'as must play the role of the big brother [*al-akh al-akbar*] over the population – arguing that they are the majority in the country.[34] This paternalist view arguably goes against secularism and may foster, as a symbolic power tool, the sectarianisation process. His recent speeches have proposed to reform the system and encouraged the promotion of talented people, instead of sectarian-based nomination, within the future government.[35] But to support an assumption above, this is still a party with a loyal audience; so, it is very unlikely that loyalist or sectarian parties leave the political field in a near future.

[34] Haddad, "Sectarian identity": 133.
[35] Anchal Vohra, "Muqtada al-Sadr Is the United States' Best Hope," *Foreign Policy*, October 2021.

Finally, an important lesson to draw may lie in this shallow but indicative quote: 'Iraqis do not care about politics.'[36] Though admittedly too radical, the key point behind this statement is that 2021's elections have increased the general fatigue of the population towards politics. The very low turnout rightly reflects this tendency.[37] Since 2003, it appears that no real change never happens, and that the same faces, often figureheads of clientelism – Maliki can be a good example – , are still here. Thus, the invariable options proposed to the population curb Iraqis' interests in politics and, thereby, hinder a true repoliticisation of the political field and of the society.

[36] Interview with a young policy analyst. **This paper written for Rewaq BAGHDAD CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

[37] Shakar Ibrahim Mohammed, "Iraq's waning democratic participation," *Rudaw*, October 2021.

Conclusion

This paper first described the depoliticisation of the political field as a two-step process: a formal and an implicit one. Focusing on the implicit one, more recent, the argumentation tried to show how two relational mechanisms, sectarianisation and the symbolic power, have framed the political field in a single way – a way that corresponds to the ruling elite's interests. The consequences of this lie in the cheated perception of politics that Iraqi citizens may have had given the political options proposed to them. Moreover, the widespread awareness of a systemic corruption has increased the general fatigue that Iraqi citizens have concerning politics. This feeling has continued to foster the depoliticisation of the society. But a society that misapprehends politics – either because the options are flawed, or because confidence in the political field has been lost, or any other reason –, is a society that puts itself at risk. That is why any pacifist movement of *repoliticisation* should be strongly encouraged and welcomed.

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