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# Iraq: a deeply divided polity and challenges to democracy-building

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## Abstract

In the post-2003 Iraq, democratization and state building have contradictorily overlapped with dramatic consequences. The major constraint to Iraq's state-building project is the misfit between identity and sovereignty of the state in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country where the construction of a new national identity (i.e. Iraqi) is sought at the expense of eradicating other existing identities (i.e. Kurd, Assyrian). The Iraqi state is seeming foisting the identity of the ruling majority Shiite-Arabs composing 65% of the population, thus marginalizing the identity of minorities such as the Kurds who constitute 20% of the population. Further, Iraq's religious diversity and, precisely, the sectarian cleavage between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, impose serious challenges to the notion of democracy and democratic transition. This paper shows that in Iraq, democracy and nation-building have resulted in majority rule in a way that marginalizes minorities and dissenting voices. The processes of state building and democratization, it is argued, are intertwined and their challenges overlap and interlinked, making democracy a contested subject in the Iraqi context.

## Keyword

Democracy, democratization, political elites, authoritarianism, ethnicity, sectarianism, globalization, Iraq

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## Introduction

Iraq is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country; hence, its society is deeply divided. It is a mosaic of ethnic fragmentation and religion faction, Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and Assyrians; Muslims (of Shiite and Sunni extractions), Christians, Yazidis, and Kakaies. Kurds are located in the north, Sunni Arabs are in the center and Shiite Arabs are in the South. Thus,

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throughout the country from North to South and East to West, ethnic and religious factions overlap. The people of Iraq do not share a great sense of belonging to a single nation as Iraqis. This has resulted in the miss-fit between the 'sovereignty' and the 'identity' of the state. That is, Iraq as a state is present but 'Iraqi society' is absent; this has brought about the dilemma of state-society relations in the democratization process.

The foregoing problem is noteworthy because it enables us better understand the socio-political context of Iraq. Also it is imperative because it makes an attempt to highlight the responsibility of society in the political process; further, it is vital to illuminate problems and prospects associated with society in relation to democratization. That is by discussing state-society relations, the strangeness between sovereignty and identity, the relationship between stake holders and grassroots and how they are responsive to the notion of democratic rule.

In this paper I argue that democracy faces certain challenges in Iraq. The paper focuses on the role of society in democratization and argues that the major hindrance to democracy are both sectarian-cleavage and ethnic-fragmentation. To arrest such obstacles, it is argued that there is need to strengthen state-society relations. Concerning the data collection method, this paper mostly depends on secondary references. Further, it is a textual analysis of the existing literature on the subject and the literature review is discussed throughout the paper.

The structure of this paper is as follows: it starts with defining democracy and how it can be understood in the context of Iraq, the second part discusses democratization with highlighting the role of 'Iraqi societies'. The third part identifies dilemmas to democratization and underlines the vitality of state-society relations, and finally part four offers a conclusion.

## Understanding democracy in the context of Iraq

Depending on a Socratic dialogue that says democracy is the 'majority consent', democracy, for the most part can be understood as 'majority rule'. Democracy *per-se* is derived from two Greek terms *demos* as 'the people' and *kraitian* 'the rule', roughly translated as 'the rule by the people', in a general straightforward sense 'democracy means a government of people by the people and for the people' (Keenan, 2003: 80). Yet such a definition is abstract, a minimum defining is a political system in which the 'entire adult population has the *opportunity* to *participate* in decision making in that society and to enjoy legal political and civil protection of individual rights and freedoms' (Huggins, 2005: 167 emphasis added). That is, in principle democracy is about equal opportunity and participation in the decision making process, 'one person one vote'. In modern societies democracy has adopted a new phase; 'representation'. Hence, perceptions of 'democratic rule' have changed as its practice has transformed. Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which 'rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives' (Schmitter and Karl, 1996: 50).

The above definitions of democracy are applicable in the context of Iraq: it is understandable to view 'democracy' as the majority consent, and 'democratic system' as a system that gives the adult population opportunity to participate in the decision making process, and 'democratic rule' as an apparatus of rule that allows the people to elect their representatives,

and enables the ruled to hold the rulers accountable. Yet in Iraq, the matter is not associated with the *kraitian* [the rule and its system] but rather with the *demos* [the people]. Yet, to understand the concept of 'the people' in the context of Iraq requires a quick glance to the modern history of Iraq.

The 'nation-state' building in Iraq can be traced back to 1920s, when the state-of-Iraq formed by colonial powers and then the society built into it, in a sense it can be argued that both Iraqi state and society were 'artificial'. Ever since there has been miss-fit between 'Sovereignty' and 'Identity' of the state, the people within the boundaries of Iraq do not have a great sense of belonging to a single nation as *Iraqis*. The apparatus of rule have not represented all the segments of society. At times either Kurds, Shiites or Sunnis have been marginalized, the control of power and the rule of the state have been problematic throughout the history of Iraq. The use and abuse of power by the state authorities is at the root of the current confrontation within society. That is because, any segment of society that takes power, automatically prioritize their faction over the other ethnic/religious groups. Saddam's hostility against Kurds and Arabs [Sunni/Shia] can be a clear example in this regard.

The Ba'ath Regime infiltrated hatred into society; by using a single party system during thirty years of dictatorship the Iraqi population was mobilized with fear. Saddam was in charge, an Arab nationalist who claimed to be from the Sunni sect with Secular Philosophy and Ideology: Ba'athism. Sunni-Arabs were in power, the apparatus of rule with the legitimate use of violence dictated, in a multi-ethnic/religion state as Iraq, such a use of power made hatred spread within the entire population (other factions felt humiliated), and state and society were at confrontation; popular uprising in the South by Shiites and in the North by the Kurds, in a time when the central authority was weakened due to constant sanction and the 1991 war; are good manifestations of such hatred. Spread of hatred, not only between state and society but also, within the society, among its segments, Arab against Arab, Shiite against Sunni, Kurds against Kurds and Kurds against Arabs and so on in relation to minorities such as Shabaks, Yazidies, Kakayes, Christians, and Turkmans.

Hence, the Iraqi people do not have the sense of belonging as a single nation, as long as membership in a 'nation is dependent on a feeling of belonging' (Payne and Nassar, 2006: 10), In Iraq, for the most part this 'feeling of belonging' is weak or even absent. This is due to the fact that the state '...was not given the chance or did not seize the opportunity to develop a modernizing strategy based on indigoes concepts of human dignity, legitimate authority, solidarity and other fundamental aspects of social and political organization' (Butenschon, Uri and Manuel, 2000: 9). Having this said, the state of Iraq lacks an 'Iraqi society' and this is the major challenge to democracy in Iraq. The definition of Democracy in the context of Iraq should be understood with taking into consideration the state society relation. Here our focus is on the latter, the society, as a challenge to democratization.

## **Deeply divided polity: Iraqi societies and democratization**

Iraq does not have a single society, the society is fragmented, and there are rather 'societies'. There are two main reasons for such a fragmentation, two independent variables as causes: ethnic fragmentation (Arab-Kurd) and sectarian cleavage (Shiite-Sunni). Iraq is a multi-ethnic

and multi-religion state; hence, the Iraqi society is deeply divided. On the one hand ethnic diversity; Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrians, and religion factions cut across ethnic fragmentation on the other; Shiite-Sunni Muslims, Arab-Kurd-Turkmen Muslims and then Christians. Kurds located in the north, Sunni Arabs are in the center and Shiite Arabs are in the South, yet throughout the country from North to South and East to West, ethnic and religious factions overlap. Conflict is within society, and those who are in the confrontation are neighbors and next doors. The conflict is a legacy of the thirty years of dictatorship of the Ba'ath party. The collapse of the Ba'ath regime together with abolishing all administrative structure of the Iraqi state during and after the 2003-war followed by the US invasion of Iraq was only trigger to the conflict, quite the reverse to what the Pentagon declared after the collapse of Baghdad that 'Major combat engagements are over' (Kagan, 2003: 3).

After the collapse of the Ba'ath Regime in 2003, the balance of power within the state changed, the authoritarian regime replaced with a parliamentary system of rule, that relatively 'represented' almost all the components of Iraqi society, but conflict within society as a legacy still remained. That is, brutality and abuse of power by the Ba'ath regime had left its legacies in Iraqi society: hatred and revenge. After the removal of Saddam's regime Shiite Arabs (oppressed ones) got the power and Sunnis were marginalized, quite the reverse to pre-2003, when Sunnis as minority were in power and Shiites as majority were marginalized. Sunnis proclaimed that they should take their previous position and Shiites reacted, insurgents all over the Arab countries supported Sunnis for two reasons first, the anti-west and Anti-US sentiment that an Arab/Muslim country is invaded. Second, for anti-Shiite grievance that Sunnis should have power. Fighting against the US, thus, overlapped with an internal violent-conflict between Shiites and Sunnis.

Shiites had experienced a painful past and Kurds who had been victims of central authorities in Iraq, neither wanted to be oppressed once again, Shiites monopolized the apparatus of rule and Kurds seek for an autonomous region within the state, Sunnis, reacted. Thus, violence in Iraq is an issue of 'governance and credibility' (Barakat, 2008: 14). Confrontation is active at the grassroots, middle range and even top-leaders; it is among religious sects Sunni-Shiite, and ethnic factions Kurd-Arab; it is among the people of the same city and inhabitants of the same district between next doors. Having said this, what challenges reconciliation (a fundamental step in democratization) is the insecure environment. Thus, in Iraq peace can be achieved with the engagement of all local stakeholders at all different levels form all segments of society, to provide a national vision about a stable present and empowering the process of democratization.

To understand the process of democratization, three contexts ought to be taken into consideration: 'time', 'space' and 'type'. As to the 'time' factor, Huntington has identified three waves of democracy; the first wave was in 1820s followed by the reverse wave in 1920s, the second in 1940-50s, and the third wave starting from 70-90s, to the current time (Huntington, 1996: 3). Iraq's democratization is a part of the third wave of democratization. Hence, Iraqi *state* and *society* are the 'space' within which democratization is meant to be realized. And as to the 'type' of active model of democracy is 'liberal democracy' as a US backed up process, nevertheless, liberal democracy 'remains the most commonly cited yard stick of the progress of democratization' (Brunell and Randall, 2005: 187).

During the democratization process a political system contains both democratic and non-democratic elements. Andreas Schedler calls such systems 'electoral democracy': 'one that manage to hold (more or less) inclusive, clean, and competitive elections but fails to uphold the political and civil freedoms essential for liberal democracy' (Schedler, 2001: 151). In Iraq, the democratization is or at least aims to be towards a liberal democratic system with the politico-economic development that it demands; the 'free market' in economic terms, and sustainable rule with regard to individual rights and liberties in political terms. Correspondingly, Shmitter has named dilemmas to transition 'extrinsic problems to modern democracy'. Extrinsic problems refer to the compatibility of democratic principles with existing social, cultural and economic circumstances in newly emerging democracies. Highlighting the extrinsic dilemmas, he argues 'even the best exemplars of Western democracies cannot be entirely and mechanistically transplanted onto other countries' (Shmitter, 1996: 83). In my understanding, such a dilemma in the context of Iraq is due to the very nature and structure of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy has its own philosophical perceptions, moral codes as well as political and economic principles that might be incompatible with the established worldview, norms and practices of other 'Iraqi societies'. Problems emerge with constructing a new polity, system of rule, power relations, wealth distributions, identities, norms, and values, at the expense of deconstructing the existing ones. That is, some cultural elements of liberal democracy are individualism, individual rights and freedoms, and tolerance, Iraq has 'Muslim societies' (60 percent are Shiite Muslims, 25 percent Sunni Muslims and 20 percent Kurds that the majority of them are also Muslims) that their cultures are underpinned with Islamic philosophy, world view, norms, values and principles that can be regarded as an alternatives to the 'liberal' ones. For instance, Islam is a collectivist religion that recognizes family as the fundamental unit of society while in liberal democracy individual is; different from liberalism Islam has its own definition for individual rights and freedoms, and hence Muslim societies do not tolerate all what liberal democracy may tolerate. In Iraq this can be realized in the south and center of the country where mainly inhabited by Shiite and Sunnis and characterized by sectarian cleavage. There, for the most part liberal democracy, mostly the cultural form if not the political, is refused in favor of Islamic practices and the clergy rule by Allatulahs.

## **Dilemmas to democratization: ethnic fragmentation and sectarian cleavages**

Diamond has pointed out some paradoxes of democracy that challenge transition. For instance, paradoxes between 'conflict and consensus' (Diamond, 1996: 119) is due to making the people participate to aggregate their interests and solve their problems while interests can be opposing, and perceptions of solutions differ. After the collapse of the Ba'ath regime, however, attempts were made to 'reproduce US administrative norms rather than finding solutions to reconstruction problems' (Pollak, 2004: 18). Correspondingly, Barak argues that because the 'vision of new Iraq was not developed within Iraq or by Iraqis made it inherently unworkable' (Barak, 2008: 13). Conflict and consensus occur on two different patterns: first is between Shiite-Sunni Arabs and the motive is sect-fraction. The conflict is on power (who should have it and who should not) in Baghdad, consensus on power it turned to be a zero-sum game when Shiite have power, Sunni must lack everything or vice-versa. Second is between Arabs and Kurds as the motive is ethnic-division the conflict is over territories

(where is the Kurdistan region and where is not) and consensus is difficult to be achieved.

Paradoxes of 'representatives and governability' (Diamond, 1996: 116) are manifested in the making of democracy: either representatively or deliberatively 'the people' are absent, for representatives or councils are acting on their behalf. When the bullets replaced with ballots and competition with cooperation then we can discuss the building of democracy. The approach can be bottom up, with an emphasis on grassroots within society as Barakat has asserted 'a better future has to be negotiated and built by the national stakeholders to their own vision, the role of outsiders is to understand and support their effort' (Barakat, 2008: 6). But in Iraq this is not the case, fierce conflict arise after elections regarding the sharing of power. Democratic elections often give birth to an undemocratic rule. That is, when the majority of representatives are Shiite with a majority in parliament, this power bloc can shape the apparatus of rule and marginalize Sunnis, thus making majoritarian dictatorship.

Paradox between 'consent and effectiveness' (Diamond, 1996: 113) can be observed in the case of Kurds; there is consent between Arabs and Kurds, a political consent as well as a legal one (the constitution of Iraq), but there is a lack of effectiveness: so far Kurds have been unable to negotiate a return of the disputed areas to the Kurdistan region which was promised in an Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. This has resulted in volatile and uncertain outcome. Such paradoxes exist in the democratization process, when 'democracy is shallow, illiberal and poorly institutionalized' (Diamond, 1997: xv).

Thus, in Iraq democracy is constructed as rule of the majority who marginalize the minorities. What is required is the rule by the people with full protection of minority rights. This needs a bottom-up structure rooted in society, one which reflects the culture and manifests the doctrines of the Iraqi population. A positive-democracy gushes forth from the understandings and the culture and norms of 'the people', it aims to bring all diverse cultural, ethnical, religious and political entities into the decision making process in a given territory. Having this said, the founding stone in the democracy-building process is citizenship, as the former Iraqi prime minister Ayad Alawi asserted 'The multicultural society of Iraq should be a source of strength for the political process, adding more substance and helping it to move ahead. All of this should be brought to the agenda and incorporated in a national debate throughout the country. This is not an easy task' (Allawi, 3).

The lack of democracy is intertwined with the weak state-society relations which is another key confront to democratization process. State has great difficulties in maintaining sovereignty within its boundaries that is because; the legitimacy of the state has been challenged by various groups; ethnic and religious which do not wish to be a part of it. As Clapham has rightly asserted the state has the structure of control or a top-down structure, and it is distinguished by the combination of its power and its fragility. That is because; the state and society are not emerged as common expression of a set of shared values- both is artificial, in his words, there is a 'lack of organic unity or shared values between state and society' (Clapham, 1990: 40). Further, he defines fragility as the weakness of legitimacy; consecutively, the absence of legitimacy boosts governmental insecurity. Thus, the lack of value consensus threatens the democratization process and by far state's survival.

State society-relations is the mutual relation between actors in the state, and society is vital to political stability. What needs a special mentioning is the organization principle of state

society relation; citizenship. Citizenship comprises political communities within the territorial boundaries of states; in our case Shiite, Sunni, Arab, Kurds and other minorities. The statement of citizenship-relations is an essential trait in the process of state-building 'state and nation building involves basically the establishment of political institutions with monopolized authority in the entire state territory and the integration of the population into that polity' (Butenshon, Davis, and Hassassian.,2000: 16). Due to the fact that membership in a state is defined as citizenship, it is a means by which state would be capable of creating not only political devotions but also managing mutual conflicts by improving citizenship-rights both in range and richness. Having this, state-society relations motivated with the idea of citizenship-rights can provide stability in the state and grant positive democracy with good governance. Having this, democracy-building is to be done: from above by 'the state' and from below with regard to 'the people' within a given territory. Iraq is in the motion in the democratization process yet, as Ken Jowitt has asserts it is not a simple transition but rather a 'long march', democracy remains a feasible outcome, 'though one that is historically rare and whose birth is usually painful ... those who wish democracy well should remember this, and make it a patient effort to endure the long march that lies ahead' (Jowitt, 1996: 35). Likewise Marcin Krol states the fact that 'the future of democracy depends on its ability to adapt change and learn' (Krol, 1996: 362) and that is to say, 'to each culture its democracy' (Salem, 2001: 5).

## Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to show some challenges to democracy building in a deeply divided polity of Iraq. It started with discussing democracy in the context of Iraq, then it took state-society relation with the process of democratization and finally the paper identified some dilemmas to democratization in the context of Iraq.

In this paper, it is argued that democracy faces certain challenges in Iraq. In tracing those challenges, the paper focused on the role state-society relations in the democratization process. The paper highlights two major obstacles to democracy in the context of Iraq: sectarian-cleavage and ethnic-fragmentation. The paper also argued that in order to triumph over those two obstacles state-society relation should be strengthened, with respect to citizenship rights.

It is argued that in Iraq, the prospects of democracy are fraught with certain challenges: structural, cultural, systemic and societal. The paper pays specific attention to the role of society in democratization and argues that the major societal obstacles to democracy are both sectarian-cleavage and ethnic-fragmentation. Also it argues that those two obstacles can be overcome over by strengthening the state society relations.

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