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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Iraq Protests: From Petitioning for Change to Internal Power Struggle in the Regime

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | August 2015

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Introduction

Since the middle of July, 2015 Iraq has been witness to a series of largely demand-driven, sectorial popular protests. These are the latest wave in a series which began in mid-2009, when youth-led sit-ins in the southern city of Basra spread throughout the south of Iraq, in response to power outages and a general degradation of public services and utilities. While the cities of Basra and Abu al-Khasib were the scene of sporadic demonstrations in April and in June 2015, it was a demonstration on July 16 that sparked off the current protest movement, starting with a sit-in in front of the Basra Provincial headquarters which precipitated the intervention of Iraqi security forces, leading to several casualties and one death.¹

This latest wave of protest did not reach the Iraqi capital of Baghdad until late July, with a strike on July 29 by railway workers protesting against the state's delayed payment of salaries, leading to the closure of a number of major roads. Two days later a demonstration in Tahrir Square in the center of the capital echoed southern protestors' disgruntlement with the lack of electricity—during an unprecedented heatwave.

Demand-driven Protests or a Power Struggle in the Shi'ite Community?

Cushioned by a decade of high oil prices Iraqi governments since 2003 have relied on across-the-board, extensive employment policies as a tool of social control. Along the way, the state became Iraq's leading employer, and salaries for those in the public sector and other state-owned enterprises came to account for nearly 70% of the central government's expenditure². These demands on the budget hampered the state's ability to undertake any maintenance or upgrading of the underlying infrastructure, including in the electricity sector, leading to the enactment of an "Infrastructure Law" enabling the Baghdad government to borrow up to \$40 billion for infrastructure works, during a

¹ Social media activists considered the young man who was killed, Muntadhir al-Hilfim, to be "Iraq's Bouazizi". See: "One Dead and Four Wounded North of Basra, by Security Force Firing on Protesters against Electricity Cuts," al-Mada Press news agency, 07.17.2015: <http://bit.ly/1ULTEji>

² See: Adnan al-Janabi and Louay Khatib, "The 2015 Budget between Financial Challenges and Opportunities for Economic Reform", the Brookings Doha Center, 29.12.2014: <http://brook.gs/1IV8aha>

year in which the entire budget of the country was approximately \$100 billion.³ The collapse of oil prices at the start of 2014, however, led both to the government's inability to carry out its construction works, and also rendered it unable to continue payment of salaries of more than 6 million state employees,⁴ accounting for roughly 45% of the labor force in the country. This led to the outbreak of the protest movement.⁵

These demand-driven protests have not, until now, been translated into specific political demands. More significantly, they have yet to give rise to a well-formed protest movement centered on specific political demands – such as the abolition of the sectarian quota system enshrined by the post-occupation regime. They have nonetheless quickly become an arena for deep intra-Shi'ite conflict, reflected in recent decisions and measures, considered tantamount to a bloodless coup, taken by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Attempting to respond to protesters' demands to battle corruption, Abadi formulated a reform initiative that entailed the abolition of a variety of posts including vice presidencies and deputy prime ministerships, which had previously served to fill sectarian quotas. The most prominent casualty of this sweeping decision was Vice President, and former Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki. In addition, an independent judicial commission of inquiry into major corruption cases has been formed, with al-Maliki as one of the likely defendants.

Recent years have seen the emergence of sharp divisions within the Shi'ite political bloc. Its clearest manifestation to date was the failure of Shi'ite political parties to form a unified electoral bloc to contest the March, 2010 legislative polls—in contrast to the

³ Mazhar Mohammed Saleh, "The Dialectic of Iraq's Infrastructure: funding and guarantees," Central Bank of Iraq, September 2012: http://www.cbi.iq/documents/mudh_pub11_f.pdf

⁴ There is no official announcement of the number of government employees, and media statements by government officials vary in their estimation, but the general assessment of Iraqi researchers and economists is six million. This figure includes staff on permanent contract, contractors, and members of the armed forces and the police. If we add to this the number of retirees and citizens covered by social security, the number of persons who receive salaries from the state exceeds eight million. See: Ali Mirza, "The Number of Workers in the State and the Rate of Unemployment and Population Growth, Questions to the Ministry of Planning / Central Bureau of Statistics," The Network of Iraqi Economists, 12/6/2012: <http://bit.ly/1Nb0g9o>

⁵ Ali Mirza considers that this percentage could exceed 70%.

2005 elections. After the 2010 ballot, a significant number of Shiite political groups refused to allow Nuri al-Maliki, the candidate of the State of Law Coalition, to take over the prime minister post for a second term. A second Shi'ite political alliance joined in with Sunni and Kurdish counterparts, in demanding that Nuri al-Maliki's rule be brought to a vote of no confidence in 2012. Following local (governorate-level) elections in 2013, the differences between various Shi'ite political groups on the question of sectarian quotas, as well as on the terms which would allow for alliance with Sunni political forces, became stark. In 2014, one segment of the Shi'ite body politic, backed by a Shiite clerical institution in the ecclesiastical city of Najaf, worked to evict al-Maliki from his post as prime minister, nominating Abadi as his replacement.

The source of this division might be a struggle over the representation of the Shi'ite community. This is a phenomenon seen repeatedly in countries that adopt consociational political systems, in which political organizations that represent a plurality of ethnic identities start as a unified bloc representing each identity, only to then take part in a struggle over representation of a particular subgroup. In this regard, the internal Shi'ite struggle developed gradually from a struggle over the approach to state governance to a sharp and profound struggle between two opposing, contradictory worldviews. One of these groupings tended towards unreserved subservience to Iran, while another was more assertive of an independent Iraqi identity, relatively unencumbered by Iranian restrictions. The essence of this division revolves around the problematic dilemma: What is meant by Shiite power in a pluralistic society? All other issues, however important, are derived from this fundamental conundrum, whether the matter concerns the relationship with Iran, the relationship with the Sunni community, or how to deal with "the Sunni problem" and the war against ISIL.

The first of these two blocs centers around the person of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who formed the State of Law Coalition, including forces that have achieved greater influence subsequent to the campaign against ISIL and the formation of the "Popular Mobilization Militia", ostensibly founded to counter ISIL by the Badr Organization which is led by MP Hadi al-Amiri. Other important components of Maliki's pro-Iranian bloc include the "League of the Righteous" led by Qais al-Khazali. Their Shi'ite competitors include two of the three largest Shi'ite organizations in Iraq, namely "The Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council" and the Sadrists, which are both backed by the Shiite clerical authorities in Najaf.

In the wake of the fall of Mosul to ISIL, Maliki's group attempted to appropriate the formation of the Popular Mobilization Militia, presenting itself as the lead Shi'ite force in the confrontation with ISIL. In doing this, they benefitted from widespread fears of the all-out threat which ISIL posed to Shi'ite holy sites and shrines and to the capital Baghdad.

Thus, the pro-Iranian camp was able to mobilize the power of Shi'ite public opinion around the idea that ISIL was not so much an expression of a political crisis, but of an existential one, and that war against the fanatical Sunni group was the only option. At a time when ISIL seemed to pose a genuine threat to the Shi'ite community, the second Shi'ite political trend, led by Abadi, found itself vying with a demagogic opponent for the right to represent Shi'ite political aspirations. It was therefore compelled to achieve a delicate balance between the imperatives of a regional conflict on one hand, and the need to wage an intra-Shi'ite battle on the other.

Once the electricity protests moved north to Baghdad, al-Maliki tried to capitalize on them, in what appeared to be an attempt to overthrow the government of Abadi in his first year in office, accusing his successor of bearing responsibility for the institutional collapse that ravaged the Iraqi state. Media coverage of this dispute by pro-Maliki outlets made it abundantly clear that his pro-Iranian camp was enthusiastically supporting the protests, egging its members to protest and go out into the streets. They also described this as the "Civil Mobilization", presenting themselves as the unarmed wing of the militia which had claimed to be fighting ISIL.

In terms of political demands, this pro-Iranian movement demanded a return to a presidential system of governance – a reflection of Maliki's personal penchant for centralized governance. Prime Minister Abadi was able to co-opt this demand however, turning it into a major plank of the reforms he announced on August 9.

Following a year of silence, it was apparently time for the more independently minded Abadi-led bloc to take decisive action. The green light came in the form of a sermon delivered on August 7 by a representative of Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, the leading Shi'ite clerical authority in Iraq and the prime minister's main backer, who called on Abadi to confront corruption "with an iron fist".

Before the formal announcement of his proposed changes on August 9, Abadi had discussed his radical structural reforms with leaders of the Supreme Council, the Sadrists, and some Da'wa Party leaders close to him. Ultimately, it was ratified by the

Council of Ministers on the same day, passing onwards to the House of Representatives, as a project, and it was ratified by Parliament on August 11.

Beyond Corruption

The announcement of the reforms came at a crucial moment, as the international community and the actors in the international coalition formed to combat ISIL were becoming increasingly impatient with Abadi's perceived weakness and his inability—or unwillingness—to confront his Shi'ite opponents, preferring instead to try and appease all sides. As a result of this foot-dragging, ISIL's control of the large areas it seized during the summer of 2014 continued unchallenged, and perhaps was even entrenched. The response of the Iraqi government, meanwhile, was confused and ambiguous. Nevertheless, Abadi's reforms succeeded in steering the protesters' demands towards a single focus – corruption. This entailed the promulgation of the idea that Iraq's institutional collapse was due to corruption.

While Transparency International's rankings of the most corrupt countries in the world place Iraq in an unenviable position, and although corruption is certainly one of the reasons for the state's inability to provide electricity, the focus of the slogan "fight against corruption" has served to eclipse the primary demand that initially gave rise to the movement, namely the provision of electricity. This is arguably a convenient retreat for a government that appears unable to address the problem of electricity, as it inherited the previous administration's disorganized approach to the rehabilitation of Iraq's electricity grid. This is compounded by the severe financial crisis which Iraq is experiencing and which has made the budgeting of sufficient funds to deal with the electricity crisis impossible.

The focus on combating corruption has also led to diminished attention to other core political issues, such as the call to end the sectarian quota system; the sectarian divide more generally and the relationship to Iraq's Sunni community; and the promotion of a spirit of national reconciliation among the country's main sectarian and ethnic groups.

It should be noted that Abadi waited an entire year before acknowledging the problem of sectarian coexistence and power-sharing, despite including a "Road Map" to address this challenge in his first platform following election. The prime minister chose, instead, to explain away the rise of ISIL as a foreign plot. This effectively cleared the way for his

Shi'ite opponents to promote their own vision of the nature of the battle with ISIL and the way of managing the crisis with ISIL—and to mobilize the Shi'ite community in line with these visions. Since Prime Minister Abadi has finally decided to launch a campaign of reforms, aimed at combatting corruption, it is imperative that these are followed by crucial measures needed to restore community measures in Iraq, to end sectarian quotas and to promote a new vision of governance of the country. With time running out for Iraq, it is imperative that the prime minister work immediately to engage a broad-based, grassroots support base to achieve those goals.