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In Iraq, you can't vote out the ‘muhasasa’

In 2019, the largest-ever mass protests in Iraqi history brought down the government. But the upcoming elections may further entrench a corrupt system

In view of the parliamentary elections in Iraq, the EU's External Affairs Commissioner Borell recently expressed the cautious hope that this election – if free and fair – ‘could’ become a ‘milestone for democratic consolidation in the country’. Note Borrell’s constraint: he has good reasons for phrasing this sentence so carefully.

The largest-ever mass protests in Iraqi history in October 2019 had brought down the government and resulted in both a change in electoral law and early elections. However, the core demand of the *Tishreen* (October) movement, a fundamental reform of the political system and the abolition of the so-called *muhasasa*, was not met. Since 2004, *muhasasa* has stood for an unwritten social contract in Iraq that distributes positions and power according to an ethno-confessional key. While this system was supposed to ensure that no ethnic group would ever again be able to oppress another in the post-Saddam Hussein period, it has undergone a destructive metamorphosis in the years that followed.

For the *Tishreen* movement, *muhasasa* is a cipher for politically sponsored corruption, since it allows the established Shiite but also Sunni and Kurdish parties to systematically plunder the state. An elaborate system of dividing up key positions in the administration ensures that whenever money or jobs are at stake, the democratically legitimised government has to consult with the non-democratically legitimised party leaderships. As a result, a completely bloated and at the same time inefficient civil service was created, which consumes about a quarter of the GDP and pays salaries or pensions to eleven million people (out of a population of 40 million). This includes an estimated half a million of so-called ‘ghost workers’ who receive a salary, but do not actually work for it.

Politically sanctioned corruption

Another side effect of the *muhasasa* is that ministers often find themselves unable to enforce cabinet decisions or fulfil contracts they have entered into because they are sabotaged by holders of so-called 'special grade' positions in their respective houses.

Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour have accurately described this often ignored central aspect of Muhasassa as 'politically sanctioned corruption'.

Special grade officials exist throughout the entire civil service. One thing they have in common is that they are remunerated better than the salary scale normally allows. Moreover, they usually occupy functional positions, involving something of interest to the parties either to decide or to sabotage. Traditionally, forming a government also takes such a long time because about 600 special rank posts are renegotiated and filled by the parties after each election as bargaining chips of the *muhasasa*.

Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour have accurately described this often ignored central aspect of *muhasasa* as 'politically sanctioned corruption'. The *Tishreen* movement intended to both scandalise and abolish this practice, which has allowed corruption to become the DNA of the political system. Unfortunately, it failed to do so.

No fundamental change

As in the 2018 elections, according to the relevant forecasts, most of the 329 seats will go to candidates from the big three Shiite, three Sunni and two Kurdish camps – the new electoral law has made no difference here. The new candidates of the *Tishreen* movement are predicted to win between 18 and 26 seats. Given that the largest group in the last parliament had only 54 seats, this would be a considerable number, especially since a large part of the original movement (together with the Iraqi communists) will boycott the election. However, in order to wield power in the *muhasasa* system and fight it from within via a march through the institutions, the *Tishreen* MPs would have to unite into a parliamentary group. At present, however, this is unlikely because of discernible disunity.

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Instead, the usual suspects are likely to continue pulling the strings. They are a small group of male party leaders, who have no interest in fundamentally changing the system that efficiently secures their power, influence, and

the financing of their movements.

Parliamentary opposition as an attempt to present an alternative to the voters has no tradition in Iraq. Despite a likely further decline in voter turnout, this option remains unlikely for the future because opposition would also mean giving up a piece of the petroleum pie. Shifts in the balance of power between the parties can be expected to be gradual at best – protest movement and elections aside.

Another term for Prime Minister Kadhemi?

Unlike his predecessors, Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi has renounced his own list. He hopes for a second term in office as a compromise candidate of the aforementioned 'men of power'. If that succeeds, it would not be the worst thing for Iraq and the region. Admittedly, several of his reform efforts have failed because of the veto power of individual parties (and the militias they support).

But Kadhemi has shown that he is not easily discouraged. Even the murder of a confidant by a pro-Iranian militia has not not stopped him from (so far mostly futile) the continuedattempt to limit the power of the militias. The general security situation has improved during his time in power. He may succeed in further establishing Iraq's regional role for Iraq as mediator between rivalling regional states. He may succeed in further establishing Iraq's regional role for Iraq as mediator between rivalling regional states.

The election, however, decides the composition of the parliament and only indirectly the prime minister – it would hence be risky to make a prediction.

However, as far as the core objective of the *Tishreen* movement is concerned, namely the abolition of the *muhasasa* system, the outlook is clearer: this election will not usher in the change needed to achieve it.



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