

THE SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT: SECTS AND CITIZENS IN LEBANON AND IRAQ

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Lebanon's and Iraq's political systems are based on sectarian and ethnic power-sharing. In summer 2015, both countries faced popular protests demanding better governance. These protests began over poor service provision but escalated into opposition to the countries' overarching power-sharing systems. These demonstrations were framed as nonsectarian, civic responses to deteriorating conditions and corrupt leadership. While protestors raised hopes that change was possible, their curtailment by the sectarian leadership underlined the challenges of political transformation in divided societies.

Citizen-Sects in Iraq and Lebanon

- Lebanon and Iraq have similar sect- and ethnic-based power-sharing systems. These structures have created an unhealthy alliance between religion and politics, empowering corrupt sectarian and ethnic leaders who have undermined the rights of all citizens.
- The protest movements in summer 2015, triggered by crises in service provision, morphed into condemnations of the political systems, galvanizing citizens across sectarian, class, and regional lines.
- These movements failed to effect long-lasting change in their countries' governance systems. The initial focus on improving quality of life may have mobilized diverse populations, but could not challenge the patronage politics contributing to the poor provision of services.
- In Iraq, amid mounting security problems, protesters fell back on sectarian communal divisions and were co-opted by the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This highlighted the difficulties of breaking out of a sectarian communal framework, particularly during periods of political instability.
- In Lebanon, popular dissatisfaction was curbed by the sectarian discourse and even violence deployed by politicians and state institutions, but some civil society activists pursued their aims from within the political system. This approach could provide lessons for Iraq on transcending ethnosectarian politics.

Prospects for Civic Movements in Sectarian States

- Issues-based activism in both Iraq and Lebanon is often necessary when broader reform of the political system becomes impossible.
- While the 2015 protests in Lebanon and Iraq suggest that issues-based grievances can unite populations in mixed societies, it is much more difficult to transform this momentum into a challenge to ethnosectarian power-sharing systems.
- In Lebanon, the experience of civic activists in 2015 highlighted that there was potential for challenging the status quo. For this to be sustained, however, local activists must establish cross-sectarian relations across the country, or create new political formations that can compete in elections at all levels.
- In Iraq, civic activists would benefit from working to build up coalitions around issues that affect the lives of citizens, including corruption and access to adequate services. However, given the considerable polarization in the country, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict against the so-called Islamic State, the challenges of working across ethnic and sectarian divides remains particularly difficult.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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