

Iraq: Political Trends among Shiites

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Since the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Shiites of Iraq have come to the forefront of the debate among Western and Arab intellectuals and politicians. A clear majority of more than 60 percent of the population, the Shiites of Iraq have never held a majority or even a powerful minority status in Iraqi politics since the establishment of modern Iraq eight decades ago. They were also subjected to sub-human living conditions by the governments that ruled over them, despite the fact that more than half of Iraq's oil is located in their territory.

The 1991 uprising against the Iraqi regime brought the Shiite cause to world attention, but only briefly. The major focus was on the Kurds' plight, while the agony of the Shiites received little attention. At the heart of this scandalous oversight was the Western belief that a Shiite government in Iraq would duplicate the Islamic system in Iran. This failure to understand the Shiites of Iraq had its academic roots. Scholar Yitzhak Nakash has correctly pointed out that the West's received wisdom on the nature of modern Shiism comes mainly from the large number of studies on Iranian Shiite Islam, culture, and society.

For a better understanding of the religious and political dynamics in the new Iraq, one can examine how the Shiites have conducted themselves in the past two years. Two cases illustrate the main trends in Shiite activism in the post-Saddam era. First, in the Iraqi elections on January 30, 2005, the poor showing of the Iraqi Communist Party surprised many observers. In spite of it being the oldest existing party in Iraq, with a large membership and a wide base of sympathizers, the Communist Party's list, the People's Union won only two of the 275 seats in the Iraqi Assembly. To translate this into concrete numbers, the Communists gained fewer than seventy thousand out of eight million ballots. The next morning, the party's paper, *Tariq Al Shaab*, presented a candid analysis: part of the problem was that large numbers of the party's main constituency, the Shiites, voted for the United Iraqi Alliance, a list claiming the backing of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani. At the end of the day, the Shiite green and black banners awakened stronger sentiments than the red banners of the Communists.

The second case concerns the strong and energetic movement of the disenfranchised in post-Saddam Iraq, the Sadr Movement. The group rallied around the young Moqtada Al Sadr, son of the martyr Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr and heir to a family known for its generous contribution to Shiite scholarship and Iraqi politics. Sensing the opportunity presented by a vacuum of power in the wake of the regime collapse, a group of youngsters donned black or white turbans and declared their allegiance to Moqtada Al Sadr, taking over as many mosques as they could, and setting up offices in several cities. They changed the name of the largest suburb in Baghdad (originally Revolution and then Saddam City) to Sadr City. Similarly, they renamed "Al Sadr" anything carrying Saddam's name—hospitals, districts, markets, etc.

After taking control of several Iraqi cities, Al Sadr's supporters imposed their own version of Islamic laws. Too young to be beyond the elementary stages of religious learning or even speaking standard Arabic at a credible level, they made appearances on TV stations like Al Jazeera and managed to assert themselves as a ruling clergy in cities like Najaf, Karbala, Basra and Kut, thanks to the guns of their thuggish bodyguards and the militia they conveniently called the Mahdi Army. They even set their own courts and held trials that often ended in cruel and unusual punishment for offenses ranging from the possession of alcohol to women's walking in public without what they deemed adequate veiling. Higher offenses, such as working for the occupation forces, normally received death sentences. The lack of religious credentials that plagued Moqtada Al Sadr and his fellow self-proclaimed clergymen did not deter hundreds of thousands from displaying sympathy toward the movement.

Decades of oppression on the basis of an ascriptive identity have served to blur the line between the religious and the profane. The realm of secular Shiite identity is shrinking continuously, while the realm of political religiosity is expanding. If secularism is unable to sustain itself, then it must give way to a form of politics more closely informed by religion. That is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as learned Shiite religiosity continues to prevail over ignorant fanaticism.

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