5 From Power-Sharing to Majoritarianism: Iraq's Transitioning Political System

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The greatest political challenge facing Iraq today is its transition from a power-sharing to a majoritarian form of government without a concomitant depoliticization of ethno-sectarian identities.

Power-sharing is an ineffective system of government. It is often introduced into 'deeply divided societies' on the basis that countries made up of numerous religious or ethnic groups must ensure that these are properly represented in government in order to prevent civil conflict. There are two key flaws in this model. The first is the assumption that communal groups must be represented by their own kind in government, and the second is the notion that ethno-sectarian identities will remain the most important political cleavages in a given society.

By assuming that communities can only be represented by their 'own' leaders, power-sharing drastically reduces political choice. The incentive structure of the system encourages voters to support candidates within their community, and individuals may be faced with charges of disloyalty if they consider looking for political leadership outside. Of course there may be many other reasons why communities choose to look to members of their own sect for political leadership. Fear and suspicion of other communities may mean that voters simply lack confidence that a political leader who is not of them can truly represent them. But feelings of antipathy between communities are subject to change over time; a well-executed process of national reconciliation, for instance, can go some way to re-establishing trust between different ethno-sectarian groups. A power-sharing political system, however, can deeply entrench sectarian voting patterns even beyond the point where a reconciliation process ought to be dimming the relevance of sectarian divisions in a given society.

Power-sharing can also actively hinder reconciliation processes. In such a system, political leaders are incentivized to maintain a strong culture of ethno-sectarian identification, because it is from the strength of those identities that they derive their power.

The power-sharing also diminishes the ability of communities to hold their leaders to account for poor service delivery or corruption. The community's priority has to be maintaining the strength of the sect *vis-à-vis* other sects competing for resources in the central government. Because communities must demonstrate their strength at the negotiating table, electoral success comes to be dominated by oligarchs who can use power to beget more power.

Power-sharing is also a deeply dysfunctional form of government. Because government is made up of several distinct blocs that are mostly interested in extracting resources from the state for the benefit of their specific communities, what develops is a politics of the grand bargain. As Simon Collis, the British ambassador to Iraq, quipped at Chatham House's 'Iraq Ten Years

On' conference in March 2013, 'In Iraq nothing happens until everything happens.'[29] Politics is paralysed by the constant negotiation over the division of state resources and by the zero-sum attitude of the political players. Although the sources of Iraq's political dysfunction certainly go beyond its political system, power-sharing has not helped to facilitate agreement on crucial issues that involve the division of resources or territory.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki quickly realized that in order to get anything done he had to construct a shadow government of politicians, civil servants, advisers, local governors, police and army officers personally loyal to and accountable to him. While Maliki has long had this set-up, since the start of his second term in office he has developed an openly bullish attitude towards power-sharing. His formation of the Dijla Operations Command in contested territories directly provoked Kurdish forces and his rhetoric around the role of Kurds in Iraqi politics has become increasingly chauvinistic.

Maliki's attitude towards the Sunnis has been similarly aggressive. Frustrated that he failed to secure any support from them with his cross-sectarian political platform in the 2010 elections, the prime minister had almost abandoned any attempt to keep the Sunnis in political play by December 2012. His targeting of high-profile Sunni politicians Tariq al-Hashemi and Rafi' al-Issawi can be seen as evidence of his willingness to do away with the power-sharing façade.

The prime minister has been shaken, however, by the strength of the mass Sunni demonstrations that have swept the western provinces since December 2012. As the protests have endured, Maliki has been taking Sunni demands increasingly seriously – appointing Deputy Prime Minister Hussein al-Shahristani to chair a committee to examine the demands of the protesters and drafting a revision to the de-Ba'athification law that Sunnis believe unfairly targets them. My impression, however, is that these moves have been made in the spirit of crisis management, and will not contribute to a substantive change in the political system.

Although it is possible that a cross-sectarian coalition including dissatisfied Shia, Sunni and Kurdish politicians could join forces to replace Maliki, in reality he has been able to deploy the fear of the sectarian other and the logic of the power-sharing construct to maintain power. The prime minister is popular in the Shia constituency because he is seen as a strong leader who is fighting his corner in central government. In fact the more vocal and empowered other communities are, the more Maliki is able to entrench his power as many Shia fear losing the gains they have made in the last ten years.

The hybrid majoritarianism Maliki is pursuing is one in which politics remains deeply sectarian even as power comes to be increasingly dominated by the largest sect. The failure to break out of sectarian frameworks means that this new politics will necessarily be rejected by those communities that feel excluded from and oppressed by it.

All over the Arab world uprisings have given way to a fear of the 'tyranny of the majority', but in Iraq majoritarian politics is laced with a fear of domination by another ethno-sectarian group and therefore taps into identities that are deeply rooted in mythologies of self and community.

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29   Simon Collis, Keynote Address, Chatham House conference on 'Iraq Ten Years On', 19 March 2013 http://www.chathamhouse.org/events/view/189361.

Iraq's various ethno-sectarian communities are still plagued by memories of their respective experiences of persecution, living in the spectre of civil war, and conditioned by a decade of power-sharing politics. A transition to a majoritarian form of government cannot take place without an authentic reconciliation process that acknowledges the validity of the victimhood of all Iraq's communities while building a consensus around the type of state that all Iraqis would benefit from building.

Real democracy, effective government and enduring stability derive from a political settlement in which identity is incidental and politics is about competing political platforms: a politics in which voters can punish ineffective and corrupt politicians at the ballot box without fearing for the future of their own communities.